



2018

Issues of equity among team members in special education: Voices of parents new to special education

Amanda R. Johnson

University of the Pacific, amanda_johnson1@outlook.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Amanda R.. (2018). *Issues of equity among team members in special education: Voices of parents new to special education*. University of the Pacific, Dissertation. https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/uop_etds/3552

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of the Pacific Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.

ISSUES OF EQUITY AMONG TEAM MEMBERS IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION: VOICES OF PARENTS
NEW TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

Amanda R. Johnson

A Dissertation Submitted to the

Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Benerd School of Education

Educational Administration

University of the Pacific
Stockton, California

2018

ISSUES OF EQUITY AMONG TEAM MEMBERS IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION: VOICES OF PARENTS
NEW TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

By

Amanda R. Johnson

APPROVED BY:

Dissertation Advisor: Thomas Nelson, Ph.D.

Committee Member: Christina Rusk, Ed.D.

Committee Member: Jean Gonsier-Gerdin, Ph.D.

Department Chair: Rod Githens, Ph.D.

Dean of Graduate School: Thomas Naehr, Ph.D.

ISSUES OF EQUITY AMONG TEAM MEMBERS IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION: VOICES OF PARENTS
NEW TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

Copyright 2018

By

Amanda R. Johnson

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my husband, Robert, who is my rock and who encourages me to continue to aspire to be the person I want to be, I love you. To my wonderful girls Halley, Kassity, and Kiernan who give me a sense of purpose in this world, you keep me grounded in a way that allows me to dream big, inspire bigger, and to be a catalyst for change. Girls mommy loves you. Thank you, girls, for being amazing individuals. You each sparkle with an intensity that makes my heart swell with pride. I continue to work hard and push myself harder to inspire a love of learning within each of you. To light a fiery path of exploration and discovery in each of you. To spark a flame of passion to become change agents so that one day, you will each forge your path, and become beautiful, strong, transformative women. Remember, do not expect change, make change happen!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude goes to the parent participants who agreed to be part of my study. Thank you for sharing your stories, experiences, and feelings with me. As a parent of a child who benefits from special education services, I want to thank all of the parents out there who continue to advocate for their children to receive the support that they need. I also want to acknowledge all of the parents who were not able to join my study. Thank you for your willingness to want to share your stories. My hope is that my work adds to the growing body of research that will make special education more accessible to parents to assume their role as equal team members at the IEP table.

A special thank you to Dr. Nelson and Dr. Githens for their wisdom and support during my journey. A heart-felt acknowledgement to my cohort mates from Sacramento Ed.D. Cohort 1. The sense of family that we created will not be forgotten. Thank you for the ability to be free to feel and live the process with each of you. You are all amazing!

Issues of Equity Among Team Members in
Special Education: Voices of Parents
New to Special Education

Abstract

By Amanda R. Johnson

University of the Pacific
2018

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires local education agencies to include parents as equal team members in the cultivation of their child's individual education plan (IEP). Despite law, studies have shown that parents experience barriers to being included in the process. Barriers such as a lack of information, lack of understanding of the law, and feelings of unequal status or power as compared to school district team members have been noted. The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions, feelings, and understanding of the initial IEP process as experienced by parents new to the world of special education.

This study took the form of two research articles, each with a set of three research questions. Through the utilization of narrative inquiry, I was able to listen to the stories of parents as they tried to navigate their way through the initial IEP experiences, hear who supported their understanding along the way, learn how parents perceived their role during their journey, feel the emotions that parents shared feeling during their experiences, and find out if parents knew their procedural safeguard rights.

The most impactful barriers for parents new to special education was the lack of adherence to legal timelines. Parent requests for special education assessment took up to two

years for some parents. Lack of information and understanding of the IEP process and law was another major hurdle for participants. Without adequate information and understanding parents felt a power imbalance and feeling of being taken advantage of. Parents described a disconnect regarding how they viewed their parent role and how the school district viewed their role. A copious amount of praise was given to family resource centers for their support and trainings offered to parents.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....12

CHAPTER

1. Introduction.....13

California Special Education Enrollment Statistics.....15

Purpose of the Study.....16

Methodology.....17

Literature Review.....19

Article One.....19

Article Two.....20

Conclusion and Summary.....20

Definitions of Key Terms.....21

2. Review of the Literature.....22

The Rise of Special Education.....23

Education for All Handicapped Children Act.....24

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.....25

Free and Appropriate Public Education.....	27
New Supreme Court FAPE Decision.....	29
Least Restrictive Environment.....	30
Trends in Case Law.....	32
References.....	37
3. My Understanding of Special Education: The Initial Parent Experience.....	42
Statement of the Problem.....	44
Parents' Rights.....	45
What Is the Purpose of This Study?.....	47
Why Is This Study Significant?.....	47
Methodology.....	48
Participant Selection.....	49
Data Collection.....	52
Data Analysis.....	54
Why Is This Study Trustworthy?.....	55
Ethical Considerations.....	57
Findings.....	57

Conclusions and Implications	66
Recommendations for Further Studies.....	67
References.....	68
4. Challenges and Barriers Experienced by Parents New to Special Education.....	71
Individual Education Plan Process.....	71
IEP Experiences and Perceptions.....	71
Why Is This A Problem?.....	74
Why Is This Study Significant?.....	75
Four-Frames Applied to IEPs.....	75
Theoretical Framework Limitations.....	83
Methodology.....	83
Participant Selection.....	85
Data Collection.....	87
Data Analysis.....	90
Trustworthiness of the Study.....	91
Ethical Considerations of the Study.....	94
Findings.....	94

Discussion and Implications.....	110
Recommendations for Further Studies.....	112
References.....	113
5. Discussion.....	116
Dissertation Purpose.....	116
Major Findings Grounded in Current Research.....	116
Discussion.....	121
Implications for Practice.....	122
Future Research Recommendations.....	123
Chapter Summary.....	125
References.....	126

APPENDICES

A. INFORMED CONSENT.....	127
B. DEMOGRAPHIC INTAKE FORM.....	129
C. PRIMARY INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	130
D. SECONDARY INTERVIEW ACTIVITES.....	131

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1-2 Figures

1. Description of Chapters.....	17
2. Timeline of Historical Special Education Laws and Cases	22
3. Major Principles of IDEA.....	26
4. IDEA Procedural and Substantive Standards.....	29
5. Hierarchy of Complaint and Judicial System.....	34

Article 1 Figures

1. IDEA Procedural Safeguards.....	45
2. Demographics.....	51

Article 2 Figures

1. Overview of the Four-Frame Model.....	77
2. Choosing A Frame	78
3. IEP Process through Bolman and Deal's 4-Frames	82
4. Inclusionary Criteria.....	86
5. Demographics.....	87
6. Parent Suggestions.....	109

Chapter 1: Introduction

*The birth of a child is a time of wonder and amazement, mixed with **loads of exhaustion!** Most importantly, it is a time of dreaming and planning a future for your new little addition. When we welcomed our second daughter, Kassity, into the world, we were elated. We imagined our newly expanded family going on trips to Disneyland, camping, playing in the snow, and that she would grow up to have a successful career, get married, and have children...the typical dream.*

*As Kassity grew older she was not interested in playing with any of us; she preferred to play with **HER toys HER way**. She did not take kindly to others trying to touch or play with her things. We would laugh and think, "Kassity has a specific way that things needed to be played with, and she was the only one skilled enough to do it!"*

Kassity was affectionate and liked to be held (if only by mommy and daddy). She did not like to be around other people very often and refrained from eye contact with them. She would bury her head in my shoulder and twirl my hair. She was infatuated with holding onto my hair, smelling and twirling. She would fall asleep clinching my hair in her tiny fist with a death grip that would take my husband prying one little finger up at a time to free me so I could lay her down. When Kassity was eleven months old, I was in a Master's Degree program that met at night once per week. Kassity would pull my shirt or nightgown from the hamper and drag it around the house smelling it and crying non-stop until she fell asleep or I got home. We tacked it up to, "some children have a hard time separating from their mommy."

As the months went by, Kassity learned to walk, she had 3-4 words, and she loved to play with balls. We were noticing that despite this she did not do many things the same way that her older sister had done. By seventeen months the 3-4 words that Kassity was able to say prior

were now gone and in their place were tantrums. I was starting to think that everything was not all right. I printed off a milestone chart and went to work highlighting the developmental milestones she could not do. I highlighted until the colors beamed from the newly saturated paper and state of color on the paper sent me reeling into panic mode.... **“something was wrong with my baby.”**

As a wave of panic and dread washed over my body and nausea whaled up into a pit in my stomach, I took to the internet to research and educate myself on the possibilities. I had to devise a game plan on how to approach my husband. Once we were both on the same page, I embarked on my next step. With the milestone list in one hand and a list of concerns in the other, I unleashed a non-stop verbal ambush of run-on sentences on her pediatrician; this was just fear of being cut off and regarded as an over-concerned parent. The pediatrician just stood there listening intently. When I finally finished, pushing the lists towards him, he said in a matter of fact way, “It sounds like she has autism.” What a punch in the gut!

Kassity’s official diagnosis came from the UC Davis MIND Institute. From that moment on, our lives have been shaped and guided by the world of special education. I can detail out the craziness that ensued over the course of the next years in a list of “A” words: It was a frenzy of anxiety, appointments, assessments, anger, anguish, and apprehension. In the end, it came down to one “L” word, “love.” We found that in the rollercoaster of madness, that by the way, we would never want to repeat, we found a sense of “love” for Kassity. Love for the little person she was, not for the person we had created those initial dreams for. We celebrated her for being her and made a promise always to do our best to advocate for her needs. Push her to be the best Kassity that she could be. And always keep her best interest as our number one priority.

This personal narrative was part of a speech that I gave at an annual fund-raising event for a family resource center in May of 2016; this is a look at one parent's experience of finding out their child was differently abled. An individual's stories and experiences are potent sources of information. Listening and understanding the stories and perspectives of parents regarding their experiences and understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), otherwise known as the special education law, was the heart of this body of work.

The IDEA (2004) is the law governing special education; it explicitly states that parents are team members for their child's education through the individual education plan (IEP) process (34 C.F.R. § 300.345). Additionally, there are parent protections under this law called procedural safeguards. Rigorous research has shown that despite the legal mandate of parents being provided meaningful participation in the educational decisions and discussions about their child (34 C.F.R. § 300.322), parents are reporting quite the opposite experience (Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). For this reason, it was essential to listen to the stories of parents to understand the parental experience from their perspective.

California Special Education Enrollment Statistics

The number of students receiving special education services in California has steadily risen from 678,929 in the 2010/11 school year to 754,337 in the 2016/17 school year according to the DataQuest Special Education reports on enrollment by age and disability from 2010/11-2016/17 published on the California Department of Education website. California has a higher number of students receiving special education services as compared to the national average (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015). Special education litigation is also steadily on the rise in the United States (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015; Karanxha & Zirkel, 2014).

The increased number of students meeting eligibility for special education means that there is a steady increase in the number of parents new to the world of IDEA and special education. This study was interested in hearing the stories of special education parents whose child gained their eligibility within the last three years. The first three years of a student's career in special education is a time of confusion for parents, confusion in the process, technical language, and procedures (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005).

Chapter 1 introduces the overarching theme of the dissertation, a brief description of each chapter, the methodology, and organization of the dissertation. I will conduct a narrative inquiry in which the data will inform the creation of two interrelated research articles under the overarching theme of the dissertation. The emphasis on these two studies was on gathering understanding and meaning derived from the stories told by parents through in-depth interviews.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the experiences of parents whose child received a recent special education eligibility (within three years) to identify ways to increase partnerships and understanding of the IDEA. I employed narrative inquiry to explore how parents of students in special education learn about and understand IDEA. Additionally, I sought an understanding of the parental experience as it relates to the IEP process. Specifically, success stories, barriers to inclusion or partnership within the IEP team, and the parent perspective of an ideal IEP partnership was sought. The two-article dissertation is presented in five chapters as depicted in *Figure 1*.

Chapter Number	Content	Focus	Methodology	Time Frame
One	Dissertation Introduction	Research Overview	N/A	N/A
Two	Literature Review	Content and Research Review	N/A	N/A
Three	Article One	Parent Understanding of IDEA	Narrative Inquiry	6 months
Four	Article Two	Parent Perceptions and Experience with IEP Process	Narrative Inquiry	6 months
Five	Dissertation Summary	Conclusion and Reflection	N/A	N/A

Figure 1: Description of Chapters

Methodology

The purpose of qualitative research according to Merriam (2009) is the understanding of how people construct meaning from an experience; this highlights the intention and design of the study. Merriam (2009) shared that there are three things a qualitative researcher would be interested in: “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose was to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 23). Another reason a qualitative approach to this research was undertaken was its ability to describe the perceptions and understandings (Creswell, 2012) of the special education parent in regards to the IEP process. Lastly, qualitative studies can aid in the data collection and understanding of a lived

experience. This study seeks to understand newer special education parents' understanding of, experiences with, and perceptions of the IEP process/meeting.

All qualitative research is interested in the understanding of how people construct meaning from their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, in qualitative research, the primary instrument for data collection and the analysis process is the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The focus of qualitative research is on the researcher's process, understanding, and meaning constructed of the data. There are several types of qualitative methodologies, such as narrative inquiry, phenomenology, ethnography, and case study to name a few. Each methodology has an intended purpose and scope of use. The importance of telling the stories of individuals chronologically (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) was vital for this study, and therefore, narrative inquiry was the methodology selected.

Narrative research is rooted in multiple fields of study, such as humanities, anthropology, education, sociology, history, literature, psychology, and sociolinguistics (Creswell, 2007). Narrative inquiry is the collecting of an individual's stories and experiences and reporting the meaning of those lived experiences in a chronological or life stage order. This methodology allows the researcher to delve into the stories of the participant to understand their perspective and understandings of experiences over time. Narrative inquiry is interested in the chronological order of experiences as told through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This methodology was chosen because of the emphasis on understanding experiences of others through voices and stories. The re-storying of individual narratives into a collective chronology gave depth to the level of understanding regarding the experiences of parents new to special education.

A narrative inquiry structures this article-based dissertation. The two embedded research articles are drawn from the larger narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry was chosen for both

articles as it permits the researcher and reader to hear the voices of parents thus giving a vivid narrative account to the data and findings shared (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Stories are power - power to create meaning and understanding of a situation or experience. Power to create a connection with others through a shared experience or understanding. Listening to the perspectives of others to understand how they have built their meaning and understanding of past experiences can influence the way in which policy is constructed and implemented. Additionally, it can provide school districts with valuable data that can inform future practices and local policy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 reviews the historical context in which the IDEA was constructed. The IDEA is the federal legislation that drives special education as well as individual state policy. Parental involvement is a critical element of IDEA. Parents are integral to the team who serves students with special needs. Furthermore, the chapter outlines a few cornerstone court cases driven by parents seeking equity and access to a free and appropriate education for their student with special needs. The major principles of IDEA are also explored. Trends in litigation and potential antecedents are examined. Next, studies conducted on parent perspectives, experiences, and understanding of the IEP process is discussed. Lastly, gaps in research are examined.

Chapter 3: Article One

The research questions guiding this study are: (1) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services learn about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?; (2) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services articulate their understanding of their procedural safeguard rights?; (3) In what ways do parents of students

receiving special education services perceive their role in the individual education plan process? This article explores how parents of students receiving special education services learn about the processes within the IDEA; how they understand the process including the individual education plan (IEP) meeting. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how parents of students receiving special education services learn about and understand the IDEA as well as their perception of the role they play in the IEP process.

Chapter 4: Article Two

In article two, the research questions structuring the study are: (1) What challenges and barriers do parents of students receiving special education services experience with the IEP process?; (2) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services describe their emotions and feelings regarding their experiences with the IEP process?; (3) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services describe the needs of new parents to special education? The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the barriers that parents of special needs children face when working with school districts through the IEP process. The goal of the study was to identify the parental perspectives regarding barriers as well as potential solutions to increase parent involvement and satisfaction in the IEP process/meeting.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Summary

In Chapter 5, I review the significance of the entire study. I share my experiences and impressions conducting the research. A plan for next steps is reviewed. I conclude with the implications of this research, a call for action to create environments of parental inclusion and partnerships, as well as suggestions for future research.

Definitions of Key Terms

The IDEA and the following special education terminology are rife with professional and legal terminology which is defined to give a clear understanding of the content and meaning throughout this study. The following definitions are provided for any words or phrases used that have multiple meanings, are employed in other areas of study, or can be used to describe other conditions or circumstances.

- Litigation: encompasses the stages from the filing of a complaint through adjudicated court decisions (Karanhya & Zirkel, 2014).
- Parent: a natural (biological), foster, adoptive, guardian (not if ward of the State), appointed caregiver, or assigned surrogate (20 U.S.C. § 1401[23][A]-[D]).
- Parent(al) involvement: signing a consent to a special education assessment, sharing information about their child, be an active participant in the evaluation process, attending and assisting with the development and decision-making of the individual education plan at the meeting, keeping open communication with school staff, and assisting school personnel in the education of their child (Rock, 2000).
- Special education law: refers to the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (O'Connor, Yasik, & Horner, 2016) .

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Giving Life to Education for All

Compulsory education in the United States, education mandated by law, has been an ever-evolving ship guided by the ebb and flow of legal decisions, federal and state laws, and policies. I will provide a quick review of the history of special education law. I will highlight some of the important influential cases that helped to shape the foundational legislation that gave rise to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that we adhere to today.

1972	<i>Mills v Board of Education of the District of Columbia</i>
1972	<i>Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v Commonwealth of Pennsylvania</i>
1973	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
1975	Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA)
1982	<i>Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley</i>
1986	1986 Amendment – Reauthorization of EHA
1990	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
1997	Reauthorization of IDEA
2004	Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA)
2017	<i>Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District</i>

Figure 2: Timeline of Historical Special Education Laws and Cases

The Rise of Special Education

The year 1972 set the stage for two paramount cases that were monumental in what would become special education. In the first case, *Mills v Board of Education of the District of Columbia (Mills)* (1972), the U.S. District Court heard this case for the District of Columbia. The parents of Peter Mills, a 12-year-old student who had behavioral issues and seven other children filed a claim that the school district refused to serve i.e., educate Peter due to his behavioral issues. The district claimed that Peter's behavioral issues would be too expensive to accommodate and a financial burden to the district. The court ruled in favor of Mills and stated that the practice of exclusion of students with disabilities from receiving a public education was unlawful (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2012). Furthermore, no student could be denied a public education without giving an equal alternative which meets the student's unique needs (LaNear & Frattura, 2007).

Mills v Board of Education was in court the same year as, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, (1972), which asked if students with disabilities had the right to free education. Prior to 1972, children with disabilities were excluded from education. The suit PARC filed against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was over a state law allowing public schools to deny access to children who did not meet the cognitive age of five. Schools argued that children with intellectual disabilities put too much of a burden on the school and class. The District Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania heard this case. The court found that the state law was unconstitutional. Furthermore, the state must provide *ALL* children ages 6-21 with a free and appropriate education (FAPE). The State was also directed to provide education for children with disabilities to the level of that provided to their general education peers (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Milligan et al., 2012). Case law such

as *PARC* and *Mills* were the cornerstone of the creation and evolution of special education legislation and policy; their rulings can be seen in the principle beliefs of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (LaNear & Frattura, 2007).

Section 504

Following these two precedent-setting cases and those that followed, Congress passed a civil rights law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794). This law prohibited the exclusion of any student on the basis of having a disability and extended to include discrimination of said student (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Rapport & Thomas, 1993). This law requires the identification and classification of students with disabilities as well as a free appropriate education (Antony, 2012; Rapport & Thomas, 1993). For the first time, federal law was written against unfair exclusionary practices. Section 504 more specifically protects the rights of individuals at any age who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. A section 504 plan is used for an eligible student who needs accommodations to ensure their ability to receive equal access to education.

Education for All Handicapped Children Act

Several similar lawsuits followed these two cases each addressing unfair practices, laws or statutes which prevented or created barriers for children with disabilities from having access to a public education. In the three years following the *PARC* and *Mills* cases, there were a minimum of 46 lawsuits on behalf of students with disabilities for their educational rights spanning 28 states (LaNear & Frattura, 2007).

The lawsuits led to Congress passing the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, also called Public Law 94-142. This act put into federal law the requirements of all public schools accepting federal monies to give students with disabilities a free, equal access to

education and one free daily meal for students, aged 6-18 (Antony, 2012; Bailey & Zirkel, 2015; Milligan et al., 2012). The law had several mandates for school districts, such as school districts were to provide students the opportunity to receive a thorough, unbiased assessment.

Additionally, school districts must have parental involvement that assured parents their due process rights. Furthermore, school districts were required to formulate an individualized educational plan (IEP) that provided an education as close as possible to that of typically developing peers in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Lastly, school districts must monitor and assess their implementation efforts (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Rapport & Thomas, 1993).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was the first legislation that required special education programming for students with disabilities to receive federal funds (Antony, 2012; Rapport & Thomas, 1993). Since its original inception in 1975 this law has gone through many reauthorizations and amendments. The special education requirements we see today were shaped and molded with each Congressional reauthorization of the law giving rise to significant modifications and additions to the law (Milligan et al., 2012; Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). A renaming of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act came in 1990 with the reauthorization (Milligan et al., 2012).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Any Local Education Agency such as school districts that receive federal monies must uphold compliance with IDEA. An example of an IDEA mandate is that all school districts are mandated to comply with child find, which means that they must actively seek out for assessment and identify students who may need special education services (34 C.F.R. § 300.11[c]). Teachers are usually the staff members who identify students who may need special

education services (O'Connor et al., 2016). Students who are assessed and meet eligibility under at least one of the thirteen special education eligibility categories *and* need special education are offered an IEP. An IEP is the legal guiding document that conforms to IDEA, which explicitly details the educational plan for each student receiving special education services (Yell & Gatti, 2012).

Principle	Description
<i>Zero Reject</i>	All students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education (34 C.F.R. § 300.121 and 300.122)
<i>Nondiscriminatory Evaluation</i>	Assessment of students with a (suspected) disability must be administered in the parents' native language. Any assessments chosen must not be racially or culturally discriminating (34 C.F.R. § 303.323)
<i>Free Appropriate Public Education</i>	School districts must give special education services to those students ages 3-21 who meet eligibility and need specialized services. Students with disabilities must receive individualized services to provide beneficial education as stated in their IEP at no cost (34 C.F.R. § 300.320-300.324)
<i>Least Restrictive Environment</i>	To the greatest extent possible, students with disabilities should be educated in a setting with their general education peers (34 C.F.R. § 300.550[b][1] and [2])
<i>Due Process</i>	Parents and school districts can file a due process complaint for a violation within the last two years relating to the identification, evaluation or educational placement of a student with a disability, or the provision of FAPE. Dispute Resolution procedures must be followed (34 C.F.R. § 300.507[a] and 300.508[a]-[c])
<i>Parent Participation</i>	Parents and students with disabilities are partners with educators in decision-making about students' education (34 C.F.R. § 300.345)

Figure 3: Major Principles of IDEA (Adapted from Cheatham et al. [2012] and IDEA)

Six major principles of IDEA listed in *Figure 3* are necessary for the special education teacher to understand and carry out in their professional role of educating students with disabilities (Yell & Gatti, 2012). These six major principles help guide the IEP creation as well as implementation. The IEP team is comprised of multiple professionals with parents being an

equal partner in the IEP process. IEP teams consist of required members: parents, the student (when appropriate), general education teacher, special education teacher, LEA representative (often a school site Principal), school psychologist, and any other service providers. Parents are also able to invite anyone whom they deem has knowledge about the student that will benefit and inform the creation of the IEP (20 U.S.C. §1414[d][B]).

The IEP meeting is the collaboration between the school staff and parents with the goal of developing an educational, legal agreement for that individual student that follows IDEA (Brookshire & Klotz, 2002; Yell & Gatti, 2012). The IEP is the blueprint of a student's special education offer of a free and appropriate public education (Fish, 2009; Yell & Gatti, 2012). Free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment are two major tenants of IDEA. IDEA dictates the process of creating an IEP. The IEP document has specific items that must be addressed and represented, FAPE being one of the most critical factors that must be established and adhered to for each student.

Free and Appropriate Public Education

In a 1982 case known as the *Rowley* case, the parents of Amy Rowley, a first-grade student who was deaf, sued their school district. The parents claimed the school district's obligation was to "maximize the potential of each handicapped child commensurate with the opportunities provided non-handicapped children" (*Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley*). The Supreme Court ruled on the FAPE requirement to which school districts are held (Etscheidt, 2002; Rapport & Thomas, 1993). In this decision, the Supreme Court held that special education is to provide the "floor of opportunity" (Weber, 2013) and it is not to maximize potential or benefit (Yell, Katsiyannis, Ennis, Losinski, & Christle, 2016).

The Supreme Court used a two-prong measure of FAPE in their decision (Yell et al., 2016; Zirkel, 2013; Zirkel, 2015). The first prong: procedural, was there a procedural or compliance violation that impeded the student's ability to gain FAPE? The second prong: substantive, is the IEP written to be "reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits?" (Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley, 1982, p. 206-207). This case formed the basis for determining if a violation of FAPE occurred with the following three actions:

1. The court established a procedural standard (see *Figure 3*)
2. The court established a substantive standard (see *Figure 3*)
3. The definition of FAPE is documented as the "floor of opportunity" (Weber, 2013)

The substantive and procedural requirement standards (*Figure 4*) placed IEP procedures and compliance at center stage of litigation when determining if the student was denied FAPE (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006; Yell et al., 2016). An example of a violation of a student's FAPE is if a school district considerably hindered the parent's decision-making ability/opportunity to participate in the IEP process (Karanxha & Zirkel, 2014). Procedural and substantive standards, as well as FAPE, are essential elements of IDEA that special education teachers should know (Zirkel, 2015) to carry out their professional responsibilities.

<i>Procedural Standard</i>	<i>Substantive Standard</i>
<i>IEP meeting notice sent to parents</i>	<i>Conduct a thorough, unbiased assessment of the student</i>
<i>Timelines upheld</i>	<i>Programming based on documented student need</i>
<i>Parental involvement in the IEP process</i>	<i>Services provided based off peer-reviewed literature or evidence-based practices</i>
<i>All required team members present for the IEP meeting</i>	<i>Measurable goals are written to address the students' needs</i>
<i>All elements of the IEP are completed</i>	<i>Progress monitoring system (data collection)</i>
	<i>Student receives educational benefit</i>
	<i>If no progress is made, then changes are made to the student's program</i>

Figure 4: IDEA Procedural and Substantive Standards

New Supreme Court FAPE Decision

In the most current Supreme Court ruling regarding IDEA, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, the court ruled that the Rowley “floor of opportunity” was no longer good enough (2017). Endrew, a student diagnosed with autism receiving special education services made minimal progress from year to year, not meeting his goals established within his IEP. Parents claim that the IEP offer was overall the same from year to year with minimal changes to goals and/or behavior plan. They pulled Endrew out of public school for his fifth-grade year and placed him into a private school for students with autism after the newest offer of FAPE was minimally different from that of the last. In the new placement, Endrew’s behaviors started to improve given a new approach. Endrew’s parent sought repayment for his private schooling after another attempt at an offer of FAPE by the public school was not much different from the last.

The case was heard and ruled in favor of the school district at every level of the court until it reached the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruling held that the Rowley standard of

the floor of opportunity for students with special needs was no longer good enough. The new substantive requirement for school districts is to create an “IEP [that] is reasonably calculated to enable the child to make progress appropriate in light of his circumstances” (*Endrew F. v. Douglas Co. School Dist*, 2017), meaning more than minimal progress. This new ruling will have effects on the offer of FAPE in the IEP. It is pertinent that school districts pay attention to future case law as this will determine how courts interpret this new ruling.

Least Restrictive Environment

The mandate to include students in the least restrictive environment has been in the law since its first passage in 1975, and states that students with disabilities need to be educated to the maximum extent possible with typical peers in the genral education setting (the least restrictive environment) (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016). Along with FAPE and procedural safeguards, LRE is of great significance to special education teachers. Free and appropriate public education (FAPE) as well as procedural safeguards have high rates of litigation cases (Losinski, Katsiyannis, Balluch, & White, 2015). Least restrictive environment (LRE) from a parent perspective is an area of contention too (Fish, 2006; Getty & Summy, 2004; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

In a paramount decision for determining least restrictive environment and educational benefit, the Fifth Circuit Court ruled in favor of the school district in *Daniel R.R. v State Board of Education*, (1989). The following is the two-prong test devised by the court to determine if Daniel, a 6-year-old boy with Down Syndrome, intellectual disability, and speech impairment was served in the LRE:

1. Can education in the regular classroom, with the use of supplemental aids and services, be achieved satisfactorily for a given child?

- a. Has the state taken steps to accommodate children with disabilities in regular education, and if so, are these efforts sufficient and within reason?
 - b. Will the child receive an educational benefit from regular education? The Court said that academic achievement is not the only purpose of mainstreaming. Integrating a child with a disability into a regular classroom environment may be beneficial in and of itself, even if the child cannot flourish academically.
 - c. Is there any detriment to the child from the proposed mainstreaming?
 - d. What effect will the child's presence have on the regular classroom environment as well as on the education of the other students?
2. If satisfactory education cannot be achieved in the regular classroom for the entire school day, has the child been mainstreamed to the maximum extent possible? (Little & Little, 1999, p.132)

The findings of the court stated the school district had complied with the mainstreaming requirement of IDEA by offering a placement which included the opportunity to remain with nondisabled peers for recess and lunch. Furthermore, the court found that keeping Daniel in the general education class was negatively impacting the rest of the students as Daniel required copious amounts of the teacher's time. The court went on to state that altering curriculum beyond its recognition for a student was not required for mainstreaming. This far-reaching test became the basis for other courts in determining a student's least restrictive environment (Little & Little, 2000).

The *Daniel* LRE 2-prong test was a springboard for the four-factor LRE test applied by the Federal Courts and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in the *Sacramento City Unified School*

District v. Holland, (1994) case (Little & Little, 2000; Weber, 2013). Parents disagreed with the district's proposal of half-day general education and half-day special education for their daughter with moderate intellectual disabilities. The following four-factor test was developed to measure if a district was fulfilling the IDEA obligation of LRE:

1. The educational benefit of the general education placement
2. The non-academic benefit from the placement
3. The effect the student has on the classroom including teacher and other students
4. The cost of the supplemental supports and services for this placement (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011; Little & Little, 2000)

A task of the IEP team is to look at a student's least restrictive environment when discussing placement and services as a component of a student's FAPE. All team members, including special education and general education teachers, should know these requirements to effectively and legally make choices for the education of a student with disabilities.

Trends in Case Law

With law comes the rule enforcers. New agencies are often created to enforce laws and create policies around compliance and enforcement procedures (Becker, 1963). Office of Administrative Hearing, Office of Special Education Policy, California Department of Education are all agencies that oversee or enforce special education law and federal policy in California. It is critical to gain an understanding of the areas targeted in litigation as this often points to the more substantial political or systemic macro issue(s). Trends are also vital on the micro level to understand the area of success and weakness, gaps in training or understanding, and areas for improvement.

There is a continued rise in the number of special education legal filings signaling that parents are continuing to confront the school system with cases based on the discrepancy between law and practice. Parents continue to fight for their students to have an equal opportunity and access to education for their children (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015), and thus, adherence to the current laws. *Figure 5* depicts the complex hierarchy of the different pathways a parent could use to file a complaint regarding potential law violations as well as the pathway for litigation. The following section will cover a review of national as well as California trends in IDEA litigation. Current IDEA case law trends and Office of Administrative Hearing statistics will emphasize the current areas of conflict between parents and schools.

In a state-by-state analysis of IDEA judicial decisions from January 1979 through December 2013, Bailey and Zirkel (2015) found that California was ranked number four for overall court rulings. When compared to other states on a per capita decision ranking (decisions per 10,000 students in special education), California fell out of the top 10 to number 24, pointing to a contributing factor for California being the high percentage of students in special education (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015). The Ninth Circuit Court comprised of California, Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington ranked third in the number of cases with a published decision from 1998 to 2012 (Karaxha & Zirkel, 2014).

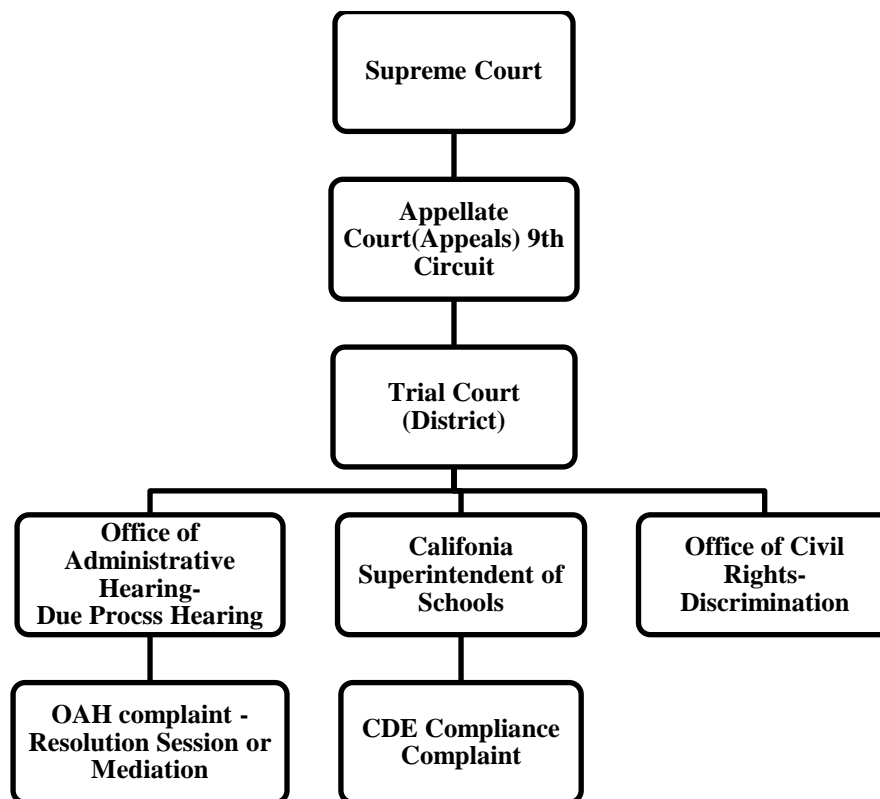


Figure 5: Hierarchy of Complaint and Judicial System

As previously noted, special education litigation is steadily on the rise (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015; Karanxha & Zirkel, 2014). This rise could be indicating a systemic issue in the broader context of special education legislation. On the micro level, it could signal a gross lack of understanding of the law and legal requirements. A longitudinal, jurisdictional study of published federal court decisions across the United States regarding IDEA alleged violations from January 1998 through December 2012 was conducted by Karanxha and Zirkel (2014). The results indicated that the most recent five-year period, 2008-2012, had an increase of 67% in published court decisions. Furthermore, the outcomes indicated that school districts are winning conclusive decisions at a consistent rate of almost 3:1 across the longitudinal trend. Parents won conclusive decisions approximately 22% and partial wins 8% of the time.

When analyzing why districts win lawsuits at a 3:1 ratio, the Karanxha and Zirkel (2014) study found that the courts were ruling in favor of the school district despite the school district considered to be in procedural violation. However, the court concluded that the violation did not result in the denial of the student's free and appropriate public education (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1415[f][3][E]; Zirkel, 2013; Zirkel, 2015). Therefore, the school district is prevailing in more court cases than parents (Losinski et al., 2015). The large number of cases filed for procedural violation is evidence of a gap in understanding and implementation of the law.

Irrespective of the litigation outcome, both sides, parent and school districts, lose. The consequences of litigation are often further reaching than the court order. The resulting break in relationships, loss of trust, and damage to the IEP team's social solidarity are all consequences of both sides not being able to come to an agreement at the IEP meeting (Getty & Summy, 2004). School districts should then meet compliance with the law so as to not break trust and relationships with parents (Yell et al., 2016). It is important that both sides, parents and schools, are able to work together to come to a compromise at the IEP meeting (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Parents continue to file suit against school districts in an attempt to receive an equitable education for their child as is promised in IDEA. An analysis of 2013's IDEA litigation across the United States was conducted (Losinski et al., 2015). The topic of the litigation findings shows that 37% of the cases litigated were due to issues of FAPE. Procedural safeguard violations were 33% of cases, and issues with student evaluations accounted for 23%. The least restrictive environment was the least litigated coming in at 7% of cases. The top area of concern was regarding students' individualized education programs which included identifying,

evaluating, placing the student in the least restrictive environment, and fully including the parent in the process (Losinski et al., 2015).

The high rates of litigation across the United States show a glaring dissonance in the way in which special education is written into law and the implementation of special education at the local levels. Gaps in understanding, as well as a lack of training, have been highlighted in the literature as potential reasons. Adhering to IDEA can reduce the exposure to litigation (Brookshire & Klotz, 2002), as well as maintain parent-school relationships (Fish, 2006).

From this literature review, we know that something is not working with the parent-school relationship in special education as evidenced by the litigation filed by parents. This could point to a lack of training or understanding in the school system as shown by the specific litigation topics. Educating special education teachers, administrators, and parents on legislation, case law, and procedures were all listed as high priorities (Antony, 2012; Getty & Summy, 2004; Yell, Ryan, Rozalski & Katsiyannis, 2009; Zirkel, 2016). The review of the literature reveals the importance of learning IDEA and points to areas of needed improvement.

References

- Antony, P. J. (2012). Understanding the history, current status & future of special education in the united states. *Loyola Journal of Social Sciences*, 26(2), 251-265.
- Artiles, A. J., & Kozleski, E. B. (2016). Inclusive education's promises and trajectories: Critical notes about future research on a venerable idea. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(43), 1-25.
- Bailey, T. R., & Zirkel, P. A. (2015). Frequency trends of court decisions under the individuals with disabilities education act. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 28(1), 3-13.
- Becker, H. S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176 (1982).
- Brookshire, R., Klotz, J., & University of, C. A. (2002). *Selected teachers' perceptions of special education laws*.
- Causton-Theoharis, J., Theoharis, G., Orsati, F., & Cosier, M. (2011). Does self-contained special education deliver on its promises? A critical inquiry into research and practice. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 24(2), 61-78.
- Cheatham, G. A., Hart, J. E., Malian, I., & McDonald, J. (2012b). Six things to never say or hear during an IEP meeting: Educators as advocates for families. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 44(3), 50-57.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli,

- P. B. Elmore, J. L. Green (Ed), G. Camilli (Ed) & P. B. Elmore (Ed) (Eds.), (pp. 477-487). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education*, 874 F. 2d 1036 (5th Cir. 1989).
- Education for All Handicapped Children Act* of 1974. 1974.
- Egan, K. (1991). *Primary understanding: Education in early childhood*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 580 U.S. _ (2017).
- Etscheidt, S. (2002). Extended school year services: A review of eligibility criteria and program appropriateness. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 27(3), 188-203.
- Fish, W. W. (2006). Perceptions of parents of students with autism towards the iep meeting: A case study of one family support group chapter. *Education*, 127(1), 56-68.
- Fish, W. W. (2009). Educator perceptions toward the IEP meeting. *Academic Leadership*, 7(4), 10.
- Getty, L. A., & Summy, S. E. (2004). The course of due process. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36(3), 40-43.
- Individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA), 20U.S.C. (2004).
- Karaxha, Z., & Zirkel, P. A. (2014). Trends in special education case law: Frequency

- and outcomes of published court decisions 1998-2012. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 27(2), 55-65.
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2014). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lake, J. F., & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(4), 240-251.
- LaNear, J., & Frattura, E. (2007). Getting the stories straight: Allowing different voices to tell an "effective history" of special education law in the united states. *Education and the Law*, 19(2), 87-109.
- Little, S. G., & Little, K. A. (2000). Legal and ethical issues of inclusion. *Special Services in the Schools*, 15(1), 125-143.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications.
- Losinski, M., Katsiyannis, A., Balluch, F., & White, S. (2015). Litigation and students with disabilities: An overview of cases from 2013. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 28(1), 25-37.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia, 348 F. Supp 866 (1972).
- Milligan, J., Neal, G., & Singleton, J. (2012). Administrators of special and gifted education: Preparing them for the challenge. *Education*, 133(1), 171-180.

- O'Connor, E. A., Yasik, A. E., & Horner, S. L. (2016). Teachers' knowledge of special education laws: What do they know? *Insights on Learning Disabilities*, 13(1), 7-18.
- Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 343 F. Supp. 279 (E.D. Penn. 1972).
- Rapport, M. J. K., & Thomas, S. B. (1993). Extended school year: Legal issues and implications. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (JASH)*, 18(1), 16-27.
- Reiman, J. W., Beck, L., Coppola, T., Engiles, A., & Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in, Special Education. (2010). *Parents' experiences with the IEP process: Considerations for improving practice*. Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE).
- Rock, M. L. (2000). Parents as equal partners. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 32(6), 30-37.
- Sacramento City Unified School District v. Holland, 14 F.3d 1398 (9th Cir. 1994).
- Stoner, J. B., Bock, S. J., Thompson, J. R., Angell, M. E., Heyl, B. S., & Crowley, E. P. (2005). Welcome to our world: Parent perceptions of interactions between parents of young children with ASD and education professionals. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 20(1), 39-51.
- Tucker, V., & Schwartz, I. (2013b). Parents' perspectives of collaboration with school professionals: Barriers and facilitators to successful partnerships in planning for students with ASD. *School Mental Health*, 5(1), 3-14.
- Weber, M. C. (2013). "All areas of suspected disability". *Loyola Law Review*, 59(2), 289-322.

- Yell, M. L., & Gatti, S. L. N. (2012). Legal issues and teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders: Identification, Assessment, and Instruction of Students with EBD*, 22, 1-29.
- Yell, M. L., Katsiyannis, A., Ennis, R. P., Losinski, M., & Christle, C. A. (2016). Avoiding substantive errors in individualized education program development. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 49(1), 31-40.
- Yell, M. L., Ryan, J. B., Rozalski, M. E., & Katsiyannis, A. (2009). The U.S. supreme court and special education: 2005 to 2007. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 41(3), 68-75.
- Yell, M. L., Shriner, J. G., & Katsiyannis, A. (2006). Individuals with disabilities education improvement act of 2004 and IDEA regulations of 2006: Implications for educators, administrators, and teacher trainers. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 39(1), 1-24.
- Zirkel, P. A. (2013). Is it time for elevating the standard for FAPE under IDEA? *Exceptional Children*, 79(4), 497-508.
- Zirkel, P. A. (2015). Special education law: Illustrative basics and nuances of key IDEA components. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 38(4), 263-275.

Chapter 3: My Understanding of Special Education: The Initial Parent Experience

“We are all different, which is great because we are all unique. Without diversity life would be very boring.” — Catherine Pulsifer

Parents have been an integral force behind the movement for children with disabilities to be included in the public education system. Parents have continued to advocate for equity in education for their children with disabilities to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Litigation over inclusion and equity for students with special needs has been occurring consistently since two pivotal cases in 1972: *Mills v Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (Mills), and *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (PARC). The two class-action federal District Court cases challenged the exclusion of students from public education based on the severity of their disability (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). These two foundational cases helped pave the way for legislation for individuals with special needs.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the law governing the free public education of students with special needs. IDEA is a complex piece of legislation created through litigation, multiple reauthorizations, and research. A cornerstone to IDEA is parental involvement (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). Parents are equal team members in their child’s individual education plan (IEP) process. As a team member, the parent has a vested interest in their child’s education as well as valuable information about the student. Parents can make suggestions on placement, decline recommendations for assessment, and suggest alternate resources where necessary. Despite the law mandating parental involvement, current studies are showing parents’ perceptions of the IEP meeting as negative experiences (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Applequist, 2009). Studies point to an issue of trust, cohesiveness, and teacher education

on special education law (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Rodriguez, Blatz, & Elbaum, 2014).

Studies reveal that parents report a lack of understanding and training for themselves in the area of IDEA (Nutting, Porfeli, Queen, & Algozzine, 2006). In a study on the perspective of parents of students with autism regarding their IEP experiences, Fish (2006) found that parents perceived the need to gain special education law knowledge through self-study to advocate for their child's needs. In a follow-up study by Fish (2008), 44% of parents surveyed indicated that their special education understanding was obtained by educating themselves. It is notable then that studies show that school staff identify parent education of IDEA as their responsibility (Fish, 2009; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Staff highlight parent training regarding the law as a necessity to enhance the quality of parent-school collaboration, which in turn, increases the parent-school relationship and effectiveness of the IEP process (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). IDEA's mandate of parental involvement did not come with a directive of who is to train parents on the law.

Despite school staff's claim that educating parents on IDEA is their responsibility, parents report needing unbiased information so as to no longer feel isolated and incompetent during IEP meetings (Applequist, 2009). Parents have described not understanding the extremely specialized language of special education (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Current studies show parents perceive the need to be fully informed of the special education process, service options, and procedures to make the best decisions for their child (Applequist, 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2014). Lake and Billingsley (2000) conducted a qualitative study using grounded theory to analyze the perspectives of parents, administrators, and mediators after due process or mediation sessions regarding the parent-school conflict. Parents reported feeling an imbalance of knowledge regarding the "rules and regulations" in

special education which led to feeling unable to adequately advocate for their child thereby creating conflict. This imbalance of knowledge and understanding of the law which governs special education is the heart of the current study.

Statement of the Problem

The lack of equity regarding IDEA training amongst IEP team members, more specifically that of parent members, results in parent-school conflict (Getty & Summy, 2004; Lake & Billingsley, 2000), thus increasing the due process and mediation filings (Office of Administrative Hearings, Quarterly Report 2014/15, 2017). School district and school site team members such as special education teachers and service professionals have received various levels of training in the special education legal requirements. The lack of parental training creates an inequity of knowledge and understanding of the law. There is a dissonance that exists between law, current practice, and understanding of the law. The IDEA gives the expressed right of parental involvement in the IEP process (34 C.F.R. § 300.345). Parents continue to advocate for equity in education for their children with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015). However, current studies reveal parents lack understanding of IDEA and the IEP process which creates difficulties when making fully informed decisions regarding their child's education (Rodriguez et al., 2014; Applequist, 2009). For parents to become an equal team member, they must be fully informed and understand the law (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Parents' Rights

Parents are afforded procedural safeguards listed in *Figure 1*. Procedural safeguards were established to protect the rights of parents and students with disabilities as well as to provide a prescriptive system for resolving disputes between parents and LEAs.

1.	Independent educational evaluation
2.	Prior written notice
3.	Parental consent
4.	Access to educational records
5.	The opportunity to present and resolve complaints, including (a) The time period in which to make a complaint (b) The opportunity for the agency to resolve the complaint (c) The availability of mediation
6.	The child's placement during pendency of due process proceedings
7.	Procedures for students who are subject to placement in an interim alternative educational setting
8.	Requirements for unilateral placement by parents of children in private schools at public expense
9.	Due process hearings, including requirements for disclosure of evaluation results and recommendations
10.	State-level appeals (if applicable in that state)
11.	Civil actions (e.g., suits in state or federal court), including the time period in which to file such actions
12.	Attorneys' fees (20 U.S.C. § 415[d][2])

Figure 1: IDEA Procedural Safeguards (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski & Katsiyannis, 2009)

Parents should receive a copy of their procedural safeguards at the annual IEP meeting. Procedural safeguards are also given in conjunction with an initial assessment plan. The initial assessment is to determine a student's eligibility for special education services. Additionally, they are given when a due process complaint is received or if a removal occurs that is considered

a change of placement (20 U.S.C. §1415[d]; 34 C.F.R. § 300.504; EC 56301[d][2], EC 56321, and 56341.1[g][1]). School districts have the responsibility of understanding the procedural safeguards and explaining or answering any questions that parents may have about them.

However, despite procedural safeguards, parents are still unaware of their legal rights.

Three independent studies spanning from 1984 to 2012 were conducted regarding the readability of procedural safeguards. The results have shown an increase in the complexity and reading level of the procedural safeguards document. Roit and Pfohl (1984) analyzed procedural safeguard forms from 25 states using four different readability formulas (Dale-Chall, Flesch, Fog, and New Reading Ease) and found that the readability ranged from a 4th grade to 9th grade reading level with the average being 6th grade. In 2006, Fitzgerald and Watkins analyzed all 50 states' procedural safeguards. The results were drastically different. Of the 50 states using the Dale-Chall formula only 4-8% were at a 7th to 8th grade reading level. The majority 92-96% were at or above the 9th-10th grade reading level. However, when the Flesch grade level formula was used it revealed that over 50% of the documents were written at college level or higher readability. In the third study, Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, and Acevedo-Garcia (2012) analyzed procedural safeguard forms from all 50 states plus the District of Columbia using a different readability formula called SMOG. The results identified 6% scoring at the 10th-12th grade reading level, 55% in the 13th-16th grade reading level, and the remaining 39% scoring in the 17th grade level or graduate/professional readability level. Given the complexity of language contained in the procedural safeguards document it is important that parents are given an explanation of their rights as well as an opportunity to have their questions answered (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Roit & Pfohl, 1984).

In a study focusing on the differences of knowledge and perception of special education parents and general education parents within the same school districts, Nutting et al., (2006) collected survey data across nine different IDEA focus areas. The study revealed, with the use of descriptive statistics, that approximately a third of special education parents did not know that they had the right to due process. Incorrect answers to IDEA knowledge questions for special education parents spanned from 40-70% incorrect. An overwhelming majority (99%) of special education parents responded that they should be involved in their child's education. However, one-third did not know that they were legally entitled to the right of parent involvement. This study highlights the disparity in legal understanding between school districts and parents of students receiving special education services.

What Is the Purpose of This Study?

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how parents of students receiving special education services learn about and understand the IDEA as well as their perception of the role they play in the IEP process. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services learn about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?; (2) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services articulate their understanding of their procedural safeguard rights?; (3) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services perceive their role in the individual education plan process?

Why Is This Study Significant?

As a member of the IEP team, parents have a legal right to a working understanding of IDEA, the law governing special education. Per the literature, a vast majority of parents are not

aware of their rights or the IEP process (Applequist, 2009; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Nutting et al., 2006). Understanding how parents gain their training and understanding of the law, as well as their perception of their role in the IEP process, is vital for policy creation and implementation at the local, state, and national level. Additionally, this research has implications for teacher training within the university and credentialing systems. Lastly, this research can influence the programs, practices, and support given to families by family resource and empowerment centers.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry is a research approach in which the researcher typically conducts in-depth interviews with participants. Participants share information in the form of stories marking their understanding and perspective of specific experiences over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study focused on collecting individual stories to understand the collective chronological experience of parents with children who are new to receiving special education services. Therefore, narrative inquiry was chosen. It is important to note that participants do not share stories in chronological order. Narrative inquiry researchers employ a method of re-storying the narrative accounts into chronological order (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Three common dimensions of narrative inquiry which serves as a conceptual framework, according to Connelly and Clandinin (2006) are temporality, sociality, and place. These three dimensions should be explored throughout the narrative inquiry. The first is temporality, the derived meaning of experience of people and events can change given a person's past, present, and future experiences. The meaning of experiences shared today by a participant could sound and be portrayed differently tomorrow or in the future. The population targeted for this study was done so intentionally to combat temporality. By focusing the study on newer eligible students to special education, it reduces the risk for stories to have changed due to multiple years

dealing with special education. Additionally, parents who work for entities such as the public school system or family resource centers were excluded from the study so as not to confound the parent experiences.

Sociality is two-fold. It is the dealing of the participant's personal feelings, emotions, hopes, morals, or desires as well as the societal conditions in which the participant's experiences occurred. Social conditions can be institutional, social, cultural, and even linguistic (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Questions were developed to elicit emotions as well as culture and institutional factors contributing to the parental experience. As a researcher, my presence and the mere asking of questions will influence the participant's responses. To minimize the researcher impact, I remained open and transparent with participants about the purpose of the study through the consent form. I also utilized open-ended, non-leading questions during the interviews.

The third dimension, place as defined by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) is the physical location in which the experience took place. The physical space is linked to our experiences. Therefore, the stories we tell about our experiences are about a particular place. Participants were asked specific questions about the physical location and environmental space of their initial IEP meeting. Probes were used to capture the feelings and emotions participants shared surrounding the physical space of the meeting.

Participant Selection

The sample size for this study was five participants. Narrative inquiry studies can have a sample size of one. For this study, it was important to gain a collection of experiences from the region for a thicker, richer understanding of the experience of parents new to special education. For this study, parent was defined as the parent (educational rights holder) whom attended and

was the participant in the IEP process and meeting for the student in special education for which they were sharing experiences. This study focused on parents new to special education within the last three years. The perceptions of parents with more experience with the processes of special education were not represented in this study. Moreover, the perceptions of the participating school district IEP team members for each of these five participants were also not represented in this study.

Snowball sampling, the referring of potential participants by others was used as the first tier of sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Snowballing was followed by purposeful sampling, the selecting of participants who meet a specific criterion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were recruited from within Northern California. Recruitment occurred via the dissemination of a brief description of the research to the local Special Education Local Plan Area, Community Advisory Committees, Regional Centers, family resource centers, and Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. A screening process was utilized to identify participants that met the inclusion criteria. Potential participants were screened through a telephone intake interview that used the following inclusionary criteria: (1) Educational rights holder (as defined in IDEA) of a child on a current IEP within the region under study in Northern California; (2) Must have been the parent who engaged in the IEP processes from initial assessment to current annual; (3) Initial IEP must be within 3 school years from a school district within the region under study in Northern California; (4) Student must have received an eligibility for Special Education while in grades K-6; (5) Parent must be new to the IEP process, for example only one child in the household who has ever gone through the assessment process to determine special education eligibility; (6) Triennial review including assessment process has

not occurred at the time of interviews; (7) Agree to participate in a two-part, audio-recorded interview.

The Demographic Intake Form (*Appendix B*) was filled out with those respondents who met the inclusionary criteria before the first interview started. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure variation of represented school districts and counties. Accounting for variations in school districts represented aided in mitigating data collected that is specific to a particular district's policy or procedure.

Five participants (see *Figure 2. Demographics*) were interviewed for this research study. Four were mothers, and one was a father of a child newly qualified for special education. One of the five participants was an adoptive parent. Four of the five students new to special education were male, and one was female.

School District	4
County	3
Gender of Participant	
Female	4
Male	1
Gender of Student	
Female	1
Male	4
Ethnicity of Participant	
White	2
Asian Indian	1
Hispanic	1
Dual Parent Household	4

Single Parent Household	1
Income Level	
0-20,000	1
20,001-30,000	1
Above 105, 001	3
Initial Eligibility	
Speech and Language Impairment	3
Other Health Impairment	3
Grade	
Kinder	1
2nd	1
3rd	1
4th	2

Figure 2: Demographics

Jill is a working mother and wife in her forties. She has one child who is in fourth grade and has an IEP. Debbie is a married mother of three also in her forties. Her first born is in first grade and currently has an IEP. Grette is a wife and working mother of three children. Her eldest is in fourth grade and has an IEP. Grette is in her thirties. Adam is a married father of two children in his forties. His third grader has an IEP and is the eldest of his two children. Camila is a single mother of three children. Her middle child is in Kindergarten and has an IEP. The education level as well as field of study for each participant was not collected as part of the demographic intake form. However, during the screening process any participant working in the field of special education specially not included in the study.

Data Collection

I developed a semi-structured, interview guide to assist in facilitating in-person open-ended interviews. Interview guides according to Patton (1987) outline the issues or topics that will be covered during the interview. During the interview, the researcher has the discretion as to the wording and sequencing of questions. Interview guides provide what Patton (1987) calls “comprehensiveness of the data” as the same topics will be covered by all interviewees. This method of interviewing allows for a conversational style interview.

Interviews for this study explored the understanding and experiences of parents during their first years of the IEP process. The semi-structured interview protocol was piloted with a parent and modified for understanding and clarity. The final protocol consisted of open-ended questions, designed to provoke a full description of the parental experience, feelings, and perceptions of the IEP process derived from the purpose of the study and the guiding research questions. The following questions and probes were used in the interview guide: Tell me what you expected at the initial IEP meeting?; Who explained it to you?; Tell me about your Parent’s

Rights (procedural safeguards); What was your understanding?; How were they explained to you?; Describe what Parent's Rights mean to you; How did you perceive your role during this meeting?

The interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the participant for comfort, and privacy for confidentiality purposes. All interviews were conducted on an individual basis due to the personal nature of the topic. The interview process was structured into two distinct parts: a semi-structured interview and an activity based interview. A semi-structured interview guide was utilized for the initial part of the interview process. The guide structured the questions, topics, and issues discussed with each participant.

During the activity-based interview process, participants were asked to engage in three structured activities. The first structured activity began with the participant filling out a graphic organizer depicting who supported their understanding of the IEP process. Participants were asked follow-up questions about each person or organization they listed, the nature of the support they received, and a description of the experience.

The next activity asked participants to list the challenges and barriers that they encountered during the IEP process. Participants were then asked to provide potential solutions for each barrier listed. A discussion about each barrier/solution pair occurred for maximum understanding of the parental perspective. Lastly, a reflective activity utilizing a timeline was completed with each participant. Each of the forms was reviewed with the participant. Questions were asked to elicit a thick, rich explanation of the participant's experience for each of the activities. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. All participants were given the opportunity to review their transcript for accuracy as part of member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began by utilizing a process of getting acquainted with the data through reading and rereading the transcribed interview transcript multiple times (Creswell, 2012). Next, I employed a process of inductive coding, starting with small details and moving to larger general picture or theme (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One interview transcript was selected to begin this process. Initial open coding began by identifying text (phrases, sentences, or sections) placing brackets around the text and assigning a code to the text segment. Codes can be described as labels and can be given to addressing areas such as perspectives, processes, setting or context, relationships, activities, strategies, and beliefs to name a few (Creswell, 2007). After coding the entire transcript, a coding scheme, a list of the labels with associated definitions was generated. During this process, similar codes were grouped to reduce the number of redundant codes. Following the creation of an initial coding scheme, the transcript was coded again with the aid of the coding scheme to trial the scheme and to look for any additional codes emerged from the data. Quotes that supported the codes were also identified during this step. I then engaged in the second round of open coding coupled with the newly created coding scheme (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The two codes from both rounds of coding were then merged into a master coding scheme. This process of analysis continued with the remainder of the data to be coded.

After coding was completed for all data collected the process of categorization and theme development was started. Categorization began by sorting similar codes across all interviews, looking for recurring patterns in the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Similar codes and categories can be aggregated together into themes that form a significant idea (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2012). This process reduces the number of codes by combining and prioritizing codes

by keeping in mind the purpose of the study. Different types of themes that can emerge according to Creswell (2012) are ordinary themes or those that are expected, unexpected as well as hard-to-classify themes, and themes that represent the minor or major ideas found in the data. The emerging themes are discussed in the findings section of the article.

Why Is This Study Trustworthy?

Trustworthiness in qualitative research design requires that the researcher engages in one or more procedures to increase the credibility of their study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The procedures employed in this study were member checking; thick, rich descriptions; researcher audit trail; and researcher reflexivity which will be discussed in the next section. Member checking occurred prior to coding. Member checking is the process of bringing the data or preliminary findings back to the participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transcripts were sent to each participant to check for accuracy after each interview was transcribed verbatim. Thick, rich descriptions in narrative inquiry should give the reader a vividly detailed account that allows the reader to contextualize the situation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The findings of the study were written with a strong emphasis on detail as well as the utilization of allowing the voices of participants to be a central focus.

The next procedure employed in this study for trustworthiness was a researcher audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The audit trail was employed to collect a detailed accounting or running record regarding the decision-making processes for the inquiry through the use of a researcher journal (Carcary, 2009). Types of items written in the researcher journal included details regarding the data collection process, the data analysis process (coding, bracketing, themes), how and why coding decisions were made, researcher reflections, questions or issues that came up along the way and decisions made. Lastly, the researcher audit trail included

reflections after each interview to document the researcher impressions of the interview including the participant's tone/demeanor, observations during the interview, and anything that came before or after the recording device was turned on/off.

Researcher reflexivity. Researcher reflexivity refers to the disclosing of a researcher's positionality, assumptions, worldviews, relationship to the study, and biases that may affect the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researcher, it is important to state my biases and interests in the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All researchers have past experiences and current interests that drive research inquiries. Personally, I am the parent of a student on an IEP. I have embarked on the IEP process multiple times from the parent perspective. I also hold the position of Board Vice President of a family resource center. Our goal is to support families with special needs children. Professionally, I work at the District Office of a school district overseeing Special Education programs. I have coached special education teachers in the past as well as taught as a special education teacher for a number of years. My multiple experiences allow me to see and understand the law (IDEA) from multiple frames as well as perspectives (parent, teacher, school district, and advocacy).

My philosophical assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the way in which I view the world, research, and my role within both are from an ontological stance. I view reality as having multiple versions stemming from each person's perspective of the lived experience. My interest was in understanding experiences from multiple perspectives at specific points in time. I believe that every outcome, positive or negative has multiple realities for those involved based on a multitude of factors such as personal goals, roles, skills, relationships, conflict, power, and culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Understanding the human experience through the lens of multiple perspective taking is an essential element to me as a researcher. A

bias that I have from my multiple professional and personal experiences is that understanding special education law is essential to its implementation. This bias and my multiple positions are why I chose to research parents understanding and experiences with the IEP process and meeting.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research tends to use an in-depth approach to gathering data to understand the experiences, perceptions, and understandings of those being studied (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). The use of in-depth interviews requires the participant to disclose personal information about themselves. Participants received an informed consent form disclosing to the participant the voluntary nature of the research, general information about the study, and potentially harmful effects of the study. Issues of confidentiality was lessened by giving pseudonyms to the participants, schools, districts, and even the SELPA. There was an assumed potential psychological risk from sharing stories regarding a potential emotional experience. Every effort was made to be respectful of each participant experience. Participants had the right to stop the interview as well as drop from the study.

Findings

The research findings are structured into three sections guided by the research questions. Within each section, themes are discussed.

The perception of the parent role. The participants felt unclear and confused throughout the initial special education eligibility process. This mirrored the way they described how they perceived their role as a parent during these initial phases of pre-assessment, assessment, initial IEP meeting, and follow-up or annual IEP meetings. Participants were

unclear, confused, and felt that they had a different sense of their role vs. what they felt the school district perceived their role to be.

Camila: I felt like I was there to listen. Like they were going to tell me basically how it was going to be, I could put my input in but that they were going to tell me pretty much this is how it (is), what we are going to do to help him to have a normal or as normal as possible education...I just feel like, regardless of what I say, they are probably going to do what they do anyway.

One parent elaborated on the juxtaposition of the parent role as she perceived it to be versus that of what she perceived the district's view of the parents' role within the IEP process.

Debbie: I feel like there's my opinion of that (and) their opinion. And that their opinion is that the parent is in the way. They are a team. They are there to educate and do their thing and that the parent is absolutely in the way of that; whatever their image of "that" maybe. But, I know that my role is to be a part of that team and to be there to make decisions and be a part of the decision making and that it should be equal parts.

Participants shared not knowing what their role was throughout different steps in the eligibility process. An example of this can be seen in the way Grette described their role as a parent was to be present to hear the eligibility decision as opposed to being part of the decision-making process. "I was the parent, and I would be informed if he would qualify for speech or not." Collectively the participants wanted to be included and supportive of the process, but moreover, they wanted to be informed.

Assessment process. When asked what they perceived their role to be during the assessment process the participants disclosed not knowing who was going to be assessing their

children, which assessments were being used, or when the actual assessments would occur. The lack of information was an issue for the participants as it created the inability to talk to their children about the upcoming assessments as a way to prep them for the change in their school routine.

Jill: To be honest, I didn't really know what kind of role that I have in it all. I filled out the forms that they sent me... I filled them all out, turned them back in, didn't hear another thing. Then it wasn't until I emailed his psychologist and said, "what's happening, are we almost done it? How's it going?" Something, you know. I felt kind of like they should've been contacting me more, at least given me a timeline of who was going to be testing, when, what they were going to be testing. I just haven't ever got any of that. But I didn't know if I had the right to push for any of that information either because I had never done it before.

Adam: I felt like I had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the assessment process that happened. I didn't know when they were going to be evaluating him/her. I didn't know if she was going to pull out of class for it or if it was going to happen after school. I had no idea who or what adults were going to be talking with him/her. That all made me a little uncomfortable. Not because I didn't trust them, but because he/she needs to be prepped for stuff like that. Especially back then she gets mad, now things are a little easier. I really felt bad for them because I was potentially putting them into situations where they'd be really anxious. So, I wish that they had been a little more, I don't know, not circumspect, more communicative and telling me what was going on and how they were interacting with him/her and things like that.

Grette: The (Speech Pathologist) would be on an ipad, and in her I guess log book they would ask them a series of words and then he would say them. And then from there they would determine his eligibility based on that.

Initial IEP meeting. The perception of not having enough information and not having an active part in the IEP process played a significant role in how the majority of participants described the way they felt walking into and during the initial IEP meeting. “I kind of walked into it without knowing a whole heck of a lot other than what little bit I gleaned.” This comment was made by Jill who looked things up online and spoke with other parents to try and find out what would happen at the initial IEP meeting.

Inviting a family resource center advocate to the IEP meeting was described by Camila as, “a little intimidation” explaining, “I don't feel like I'm being stepped over all the time anymore, as much as I did in the beginning.” The feeling of not knowing continued when I asked questions on the topic of Procedural Safeguards which are more commonly referred to as Parent's Rights, the two terms are used interchangeably.

Procedural safeguards. Each participant was asked if they were offered a copy of the Procedural Safeguards specifically at the initial IEP meeting. Each participant shared that they had in fact been given a copy of their rights. Adam recalled, “they gave me a form that had them all and asked me to sign it and suggested that we probably wouldn't be proceeding any further if I didn't sign it.” Debbie shared that a school district IEP team member slid over the procedural safeguards form and said. “here's a copy of your parent's rights.” When asked how their Parent's Rights were explained to them at the IEP meeting the majority of participants shared that the school district did not give an explanation, or the explanation given was “cursory,” or “not in great detail,” and “I don't think I spent more than two minutes reading through it,” Adam said.

A few themes emerged from the participants in this area. One is that the majority of the parents gained knowledge of their rights from their family resource centers.

Debbie shared, “[family resource center name] told me about were what my legal rights were...if my only exposure to this subject had been their (District) form and them basically pressuring me to sign it right away, then I would not.” Secondly, three of the five participants shared that they either did not know anything in terms of their rights or that they felt knowing all of their Parent Rights were not important at the time.

Comments were made such as, “I’m not overly concerned about what my rights are right this minute because I feel like things were ok,” and “I could google them I guess.”

When participants were asked to describe what their Parent’s Rights mean to them responses spanned from, “I’ve never actually read it,” to “I have a right to ask for services...if I’m not happy with the services, I can go to a different school.” Examples of what their rights were as parents were given by three of five parents. Despite being able to articulate one to two different aspects of their parents’ rights each all three did not know all of their rights and were still confused by the ones that they could remember. Debbie divulged her lack of trust with the upholding of the parents’ rights by the school district based on her experiences with the eligibility process for her child.

Debbie: I know there's a few laws that protect us, that say, you know, you're a part of this team and, and your rights to a free and appropriate education and all these things, but it comes down to it, like they really don't matter because the road to trying to get to that is so, difficult for some people that, I mean nobody's there to regulate them and nobody's there to say if they're doing the right thing or not. So, like when it comes to the Parent’s Rights, it just, they don't mean much.

Supporting parent understanding. Much like the learning of their Parent's Rights, the majority of the participants shared that they received a bulk of their understanding of the IEP process as well as assistance with the law, IDEA, from family resource centers. They also credited their own self-advocacy skills with seeking out information from multiple sources such as other parents, the internet, and seeking out the family resource center. An overwhelming credit was given to the family resource centers for their level of support and advocacy throughout the beginning processes (prior to assessment, assessment, Initial IEP meeting) by four of the five participants. On the opposite end, an overwhelming theme emerged in terms of the lack of support and information that was given by the school districts as a whole. That is not to say that school districts did not support. The majority of participants felt that as a whole, school districts were not as helpful, and they encountered many barriers. However, it was noted that there were individuals within the school district setting that supported them.

Family resource centers support. The four of five participants who utilized their local family resource centers described the support that they received as moral support, confidence building, as well as supporting their understanding of the IEP process, IDEA, and their parental rights. Camila shared about the family resource center advocate she worked with, "she went with me from the beginning to the first IEP meeting. She gave me moral support, and she gave me confidence, and she explained to me that it's going to be a difficult process, but we're going to do the best for my son." Debbie, another participant, described a seven-week long program focused on special education history, law, and advocacy for parents. The program was offered for free by her local family resource center.

Debbie: They do a lot of free trainings, especially for family members and self-advocates. So, I spent evenings, weekends, and nights going to free trainings,

anything I could get through them. Because we are very low income, I can't pay for things like that. They were available anytime I needed to call, I would email them with questions

Participants listed all the ways in which their family resource centers supported them throughout their initial IEP journey such as answering questions via phone or email, connecting them with other parents to learn and share their experiences, and even helping them prep for and debrief after their IEP meetings. Adam was able, to sum up, the way he felt about the support he received in the following statement,

Adam: They gave me everything I asked for and more...I don't want to sound like a commercial for [family resource center Name], but they are a wonderful agency. I can't say enough good things about them...Everything I had questions about they would suggest because I didn't know what questions to ask. They knew what I needed...It'd be easier to tell you what they weren't helping with rather than what they were, but I can't think of anything that they weren't helpful with. I just got the feeling that even, just the receptionist who answered the phone there had as much experience or more experience than anybody at the district. I mean, they knew what kind of stress I was under. They knew how hard it is to watch your kid struggle. They knew exactly what to do. If anything, I wish they were in charge of the whole dang process and that the districts would just defer to them on everything. I feel like once I got hooked up with the people at [family resource center Name] that I had all the support I needed.

School district support. “Cursorily” and “very generalized” were ways that the participants described how the assessment process was explained to them by their perspective

school district. Parents shared that legal timelines were not shared and/or explained in any detail in terms of what the timeline means and how it is used. Feelings about this time period were shared by Jill, “I felt kind of like they should've been contacting me more, at least given me a timeline of who was going to be testing when what they were going to be testing, and I just haven't ever got any of that.” Adam shared, “they didn't tell me how long it was going to take. They didn't tell me what the laws were about the required...timeline for the assessment. They didn't really tell me much at all. I got very little information from them.”

Each participant was able to list at least one person in the school district that had helped them but there was no consistency in the staff member(s) across the five participants. For example, the school administrator was listed by one participant as a supportive staff member while another participant listed their school administrator as the barrier. The same held true for the general education teacher and special education staff members such as school psychologist, speech therapist and special education teacher. The majority of the participants were clear that the majority of the IEP team members did not help them and for some were identified as the actual barrier. The experience with the school district could be summed up with this quote by Jill, “it seems like unless you really push for information, nobody tells you anything.”

Despite being nervous, a few participants described the opportunity during their initial IEP meeting to give their input once the assessment report indicated their child qualified for special education services. Not all participants felt that they were supported by the school district during their initial IEP meeting. The formalized process of the initial IEP meeting came as a shock to some participants. “I thought it was going to be a little less formal and it was very formal,” reported Adam.

The participants all noted that once their child qualified for special education and had moved through their initial IEP meeting the subsequent meetings improved. It is also notable that three of the five participants described a positive and even supportive relationship with the school district vs. only one of five participants feeling this way prior to qualification for special education. Adam explained that at the initial IEP meeting he felt:

Adam: Like we had a team, me, and Stephanie (wife), and Mindy (child), and the Principal, and the teachers were a team, and maybe the people in the district weren't on our team, but they weren't on an opposing team. They were being steered by my team. They were following the wishes at large. They were basically like contractors, and they were doing what we had asked them to do. At least at that point, they were saying all the right things, and they did seem to be open to trying different things to see what would work.

Adam later described the feeling he had at the annual IEP meeting:

I was feeling like we were a group of people who have a project, this is our project, and our project is moving forward. That we might have to try a lot of different things before we figure out how to get our project up to where we want it to be, but we are. We all understand what the project is and we all are working together, and none of us are working at cross-purposes, we're all on the same page.

All five participants felt that their child was, at the time of interviews, receiving services that they needed. However, a theme emerged regarding school districts not assessing in all areas of suspected disability. Many of the students gained eligibility for speech and language first, and then additional assessments were requested to look at additional areas of concern that correlated

to the parent's original concerns such as behavior, autism, and emotional disturbance. With that being said four of the five parents were still working on trying to get additional services, assessments, or adjustments but were feeling optimistic.

Conclusions and Implications

The majority of participants conveyed a need for school districts to educate parents on the law pertaining to special education as well as fully disclosing their procedural safeguards (parent's rights). Four out of five participants credit the assistance of a family resource center for educating them on special education law, their parental rights, the IEP process, emotional support, advocacy, trainings, and support groups. All five participants credited themselves for their ability to advocate for their child's needs and self-educate. Overall, the participants articulated the need for school districts to share the IEP process with parents in an open and welcoming environment. Parents indicated the desire to be viewed as an active team member.

The lack of understanding of their role as parents within the IEP process as well as their legal rights made participants feel that they had to enter the initial IEP meeting defensive and ready to fight. Participants described being nervous, scared, and even that their hands were shaking at the initial IEP meeting. Lastly, participants conveyed the need for school districts to be supportive of their lack of parental understanding and knowledge about special education law and the IEP process. Participants also shared the need for school districts to understand the family perspective of not only having a child with special needs but living with and taking care of a child with special needs and the feeling and experiences shared by the family. The need for more information, open communication, and support were essential to building an understanding of the IEP process and would have lessened the participant's anxiety and made them feel like part of the team.

Recommendations for Further Studies

Due to the low number of participants in this study, the results should not be generalized to all parents who are new to special education. Recommendations for further studies is as follows: 1) investigate the extent of parental understanding of their procedural safeguards and the school districts role in that understanding, 2) investigate the initial parent concern in relation to the areas of suspected disability that the school assessed for, 3) investigate the school vs parent perception of the role parents play within the IEP process. This last recommendation is important due to perception difference parents shared between themselves and the school site regarding their role and participation in the IEP process.

References

- Applequist, K. L. (2009). Parent perspectives of special education: Framing of experiences for prospective special educators. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 3-16.
- Bailey, T. R., & Zirkel, P. A. (2015). Frequency trends of court decisions under the individuals with disabilities education act. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 28(1), 3-13.
- Carcary, M. (2009). The research audit trial - Enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 7(1), 11-23.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Rosiek, J. (2007). Mapping a landscape of narrative inquiry: Borderland spaces and tensions. In D. J. Clandinin, & D. J. Clandinin (Ed) (Eds.), (pp. 35-75). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, P. B. Elmore, J. L. Green (Ed), G. Camilli (Ed) & P. B. Elmore (Ed) (Eds.), (pp. 477-487). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Fish, W. W. (2006). Perceptions of parents of students with autism towards the iep

- meeting: A case study of one family support group chapter. *Education*, 127(1), 56-68.
- Fish, W. W. (2008). The IEP meeting: Perceptions of parents of students who receive special education services. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 53(1), 8-14.
- Fish, W. W. (2009). Educator perceptions toward the IEP meeting. *Academic Leadership*, 7(4), 10.
- Getty, L. A., & Summy, S. E. (2004). The course of due process. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36(3), 40-43.
- Individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. (2004).
- Johnson, B., & Christensen, L. (2014). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lake, J. F., & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(4), 240-251.
- LaNear, J., & Frattura, E. (2007). Getting the stories straight: Allowing different voices to tell an "effective history" of special education law in the united states. *Education and the Law*, 19(2), 87-109.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia, 348 F. Supp 866 (1972).
- Nutting, B., Porfeli, E., Queen, J. A., & Algozzine, B. (2006). Parent beliefs and knowledge about special education and the individuals with disabilities education act. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 19(2), 48-61.
- Office of Administrative Hearings, Special Education Division. (2016). Special education division quarterly data report: Fourth quarter 2015 – 2016 fiscal year. Retrieved from <https://www.documents.dgs.ca.gov/oah/forms/2008/SE%20Quarterly%20Report%20Q4%20FY%2015-16%20Final.pdf>
- Patton, Michael Quinn (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 343 F. Supp. 279 (E.D. Penn. 1972).
- Rodriguez, R. J., Blatz, E. T., & Elbaum, B. (2014). Parents' views of schools' involvement efforts. *Exceptional Children*, 81(1), 79-95.
- Yell, M. L., Ryan, J. B., Rozalski, M. E., & Katsiyannis, A. (2009). The U.S. supreme court and special education: 2005 to 2007. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 41(3), 68-75.
- Zirkel, P. A. (2015). Special education law: Illustrative basics and nuances of key IDEA components. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 38(4), 263-275.

Chapter 4: Challenges and Barriers Experienced by Parents New to Special Education

Individual Education Plan Process

The Individual Education Plan (IEP) process should resemble a choreographed dance routine in which all members are interdependent upon one another for the whole of the group and the success of the dance. Every IEP member has a role and responsibility to play within their expertise area, including that of the parent (Yell & Gatti, 2012). Each expert should be interdependent upon the others for the whole of the IEP. When all of the moving parts work together to create and participate in the formulation and implementation of a student's individualized education plan, the team is cohesive (Fish, 2009). Understanding our roles and the legal obligations of the IEP are integral to the implementation of one's role (Brookshire & Klotz, 2002).

IEP Experiences and Perceptions

A review of the literature on parent perceptions of their experience as a member of the IEP process and their treatment by special education teachers and the staff was completed. In reviewing the research in this area, it is important to note those studies whose results are more of an exception and not the norm. In a study that was an exception to the norm, Fish (2008) surveyed 51 parents of students on IEPs in five different areas: experiences related to IEP meetings, understanding of special education law, relationships with educators, outcomes of IEP meetings, and recommendations for areas of improvement. The results of the study showed that the sampled parental perception reflected that they were treated with respect at IEP meetings, maintained a positive relationship with educators, and felt that they had the freedom to discuss their child's education.

Additionally, parents reported feeling that they had a clear understanding of their child's services. Parents also responded favorably to questions regarding the amount of time scheduled for IEPs as well as the amount of time for parental input. This study is the outlier and not the norm. It is important to note that all participants in this study were identified as middle or upper-middle-class and all students were in elementary school. The parents were all part of the same family resource agency.

In direct contrast to the Fish (2008) study, Lake and Billingsley (2000) analyzed the perspectives of parents, administrators, and mediators after a due process or mediation session. They wanted to gather data on what influenced the conflict and how was the conflict escalated or de-escalated. Parents perceived schools as viewing their child through a deficit lens, looking and pointing out what they could not do, thus causing conflict as the parent felt meetings were negative and did not look at the strengths of the child. Parents also perceived that schools focused on academics only and would not consider the whole child when making decisions. Conflict was reported when staff and parents disagreed over the content of the IEP such as services and goals as well as placement decisions and curriculum (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Lake and Billingsley (2000) also found that school officials perceived some parents as being single-minded and not willing to consider other available options or programming. In a study of 274 participants including general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and diagnosticians, Fish (2009) found the majority of school staff answered favorably to their IEP experiences being positive and that enough time was dedicated to parental input and concerns. The findings were in direct contrast with other studies on parental perception in which parents felt rushed as well as feelings of not having their input sought nor considered (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2006, Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Additionally, this study revealed that

the majority of the respondents felt that parents were treated with respect and valued at IEP meetings. Again, these results are in direct conflict with parent perspective studies which revealed parents felt isolated, outnumbered, manipulated, and judged (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

As part of a case study regarding the perceptions of parents with students with autism regarding the IEP meeting, Fish (2006) found that all seven parent participants who had students with autism spectrum disorder reported their initial IEP experiences were negative. The parents described being treated negatively at one time or another in an IEP meeting by an educator. Feelings of intimidation and blame were described. Participants shared that they were the subject of accusations of drug abuse and alcohol abuse during pregnancy at IEP meetings when school staff attempted to justify a student's academic and behavioral challenges. Participants indicated concern regarding teachers not implementing the IEP as it was agreed to. Furthermore, they indicated that teachers failed to update their child's goals and paperwork was incomplete. It was also reported that parents perceive teachers as not taking accurate progress data and are only reporting out progress for compliance despite the student not meeting their objectives. Participants in this study also described denied access to typically developing peers and general education instruction. Parents reported that the presence of an advocate created more of a positive meeting, school staff's willingness to engage in gathering parental input, and adherence to IEP procedures (Fish, 2006).

In an urban versus rural study, Applequist (2009) sought to understand the differences in the parental perspectives from these two groups. The unidentified western state has a composition of 25% rural and 75% urban communities. Of the 32 participants, both rural and urban parents reported that transitions, especially to middle school from elementary were noted

as a stressful time if the information was not shared ahead of time and parents were not included in the planning. Urban families reported frustration in the intensity of related services their students received. Rural families, on the other hand, reported that they were limited in placement options, teachers, and related services. Additionally, rural families found that schools suffered from a lack of qualified staff as well as an overuse of instructional assistants. The study noted that rural families expressed being forced into a position of demanding services for their child and in turn being labeled “difficult parents.”

Why Is This A Problem?

Parents are equal team members at the IEP meeting per Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Despite this legal mandate, research has shown that parental perspectives are quite the opposite, citing that they are excluded from decisions, labeled as bad parents, and are not asked for their opinion or input (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Tucker & Swartz, 2013). The problem under study was the discrepancy that exists between the parental involvement mandate in the IDEA and the implementation at the school site (Zirkel, 2013) which can be seen in an increase of damaged parent-school relationships, parent litigation (Karanhya & Zirkel, 2014) and due process filings (Office of Administrative Hearings, Quarterly Report 2014/15, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the barriers that parents of children with special needs face when working with school districts through the initial IEP process. The goal of the study was to identify barriers and potential solutions from the parental perspective to increase parent involvement and satisfaction. The questions that guided this research study were: (1) What challenges and barriers do parents of students receiving special education services experience with the IEP process?; (2) In what ways do parents of students

receiving special education services describe their emotions and feelings regarding their experiences with the IEP process?; (3) In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services describe the needs of new parents to special education?

Why Is This Study Significant?

This study was significant because California is one of the top 10 states for the highest number of special education litigation cases (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015). The number of due process cases filed with the Office of Administrative Hearings has also steadily risen over the past ten years (Office of Administrative Hearings, Quarterly Report 2014/15, 2017). Litigation is pointing to a more substantial issue within the system. The steady increase in law suits and mediations could point to a lack of training and proficiency regarding IDEA in IEP team members. This is echoed in the recommendations of studies completed on current litigation trends (Bailey & Zirkel, 2015; Karanxha & Zirkel, 2014; Losinski, Katsiyannis, Balluch, & White, 2015). This problem of practice was structured by the theoretical frame of Boleman and Deals Four-Frame model (2008) to identify what barriers parents perceive they encounter to be a fully included, integrated, and valued member of the IEP team. A micro level goal for this in-depth analysis of the parent experience using the theoretical framework is to help inform recommendations for future practices including the shifting of school district perspective when conducting IEP meetings. On the macro level, the goal is to inform curriculum at the university level as a teaching emphasis for new special education credentialing candidates.

Four-Frames Applied to IEPs

I chose the Bolman and Deal's four frames (2008) as the framework for this research study because it allows for a holistic approach to the IEP process. The IEP process is as much

about supporting the team (including the parent) as it is about the culture and structure. Frames help with understanding the multiple perceptions that are represented in an IEP. The frames do not stand alone. They work in a symbiotic way by being interrelated as well as interdependent at times (Cherian & Daniel, 2008). The same holds true for the IEP process and IEP meeting. The framework was also used in the development of the structured interview guide as well as the interview activities. The four-frames framework also aided in the development of the interview questions.

The four frames as described by Bolman and Deal (2008) are types of lenses that are used to focus and filter information to help people with their experiences. They have also been described as mental models or perspectives (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Each frame is rooted in different fields, with different central concepts, and each has a set of ideas that assist in making sense of how an individual, group, or organization thinks and operates (see *Figure 1*) (Lyon, Nadershahi, Nattestad, Kachalia, & Hammer, 2014). Each frame has its strengths and weaknesses. With that said, each frame has situations in which they are better suited for over another.

	<i>Structural</i>	<i>Human Resource</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Symbolic</i>
<i>Metaphor for organization</i>	Factory or Machine	Family	Jungle	Carnival, temple, theatre
<i>Central Concepts</i>	Rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, environment	Needs, skills, relationships	Power, conflict, competition, organizational policies	Culture, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, heroes
<i>Image of Leadership</i>	Social architecture	Empowerment	Advocacy	Inspiration
<i>Basic Leadership Challenge</i>	Attune structure to task, technology, environment	Align organizational and human needs	Develop agenda and power base	Create faith, beauty, meaning
<i>Organizational Ethics</i>	Excellence	Caring	Justice	Faith
<i>Leadership Contribution</i>	Authorship	Love	Power	Significance

Figure 1: Overview of the Four-Frame Model (Bolman & Deal, 2008)

Bolman and Deal (2013) explained that frames should make it easier for an individual to navigate a situation, like a map. If you grab the wrong map, it no longer functions as a tool to assist navigating you through the town nor to your destination. In this situation, a change of maps would be necessary. The same holds true for frames; a frame can be used to reframe a situation to obtain the desired outcome or to alter the perception of the group or organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The key to frames is that the situation matches the frame being used (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

In *Figure 2* Bolman and Deal (2008) aligned frames to match situations or desired outcomes. Additionally, an individual or group could use *Figure 2* to assist with reframing a situation in which an incorrect frame was initially used.

<i>Question</i>	<i>Frame if Yes</i>	<i>Frame if No</i>
Are individual commitment and motivation essential to success?	Human Resource, Symbolic	Structural, Political
Is the technical quality of the decision important?	Structural	Human Resource, Political, Symbolic
Are there high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty?	Political, Symbolic	Structural, Human Resource
Are conflict and scarce resources significant?	Political, Symbolic	Structural, Human Resource
Are you working from the bottom up?	Political	Structural, Human Resource, Symbolic

Figure 2: Choosing a Frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008)

Following are descriptions of each frame including examples of how the IEP process fits within each. It is important to note that some processes can fit within multiple frames (see *Figure 3*).

Structural frame. The structural frame provides just that, structure. For example, structure of a process, a department, or an organization. This can be seen in departmental policies, the structural hierarchy of employees, the physical layout of a business or school. This frame gives order and predictability. It also allows for compliance and regulation to occur with setting consistencies with rules, policy, and procedure. People often feel a level of comfort with knowing the expectation and routine provided by the structural frame (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Following are a few ways in which the structural frame can be seen in the IEP process and meeting. Members of the IEP team have formal roles which guide and shape the IEP process and IEP meeting. Examples of roles are parent, administrator (LEA representative), special education teacher, general education teacher, psychologist, speech pathologist, student, and so forth. Each formal role brings a different perspective and expertise to the process and meeting. Meeting agendas can be used to give order and structure to IEP meetings. Policies and procedures guide the IEP regarding the topics that must be covered and the specific forms that must be filled out at each IEP meeting. Compliance with the policies and procedures are essential for IDEA.

The physical environment is also part of the structural frame. Physical environment helps to shape the IEP meeting. Some questions to consider when setting up the IEP meeting location: (1) Is the room large, small, hot, cold, private, not private, in an old janitor's closet, in the staff room? (2) Is there room for everyone around the table; are the members cramped? (3) Do all the professionals sit on the same side of the table? (4) Do parents sit at the far end of the table or in the middle? The environment is a significant structural component of the IEP meeting.

Human resources frame. Teams, departments, and organizations are made up of groups of individuals. The human resources frame acknowledges that individual needs must be met for collaboration and unity of the group to occur. If a person does not feel a sense of trust or does not feel valued, they can break apart from the group resulting in forms of sabotage or attrition. This frame addresses such things as the knowledge and understanding an individual has. Concepts of knowledge and training drive the professional development of organizations or groups. Individuals that have their needs met (safety, security, trust) will engage in collaboration

within the organization or group bringing about interdependence for one another and job or team satisfaction (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

The human resources frame looks at the needs and skills of individuals within an organization or group. Each team members brings a different and unique perspective of the student through their trained lens. For an IEP to be satisfactory, all team members need to function independently and dependently at the same time. Staff and parent knowledge of IDEA would be a critical component of the human resources frame. Training and support needed to obtain new understanding or skills are also vital. Staff and parent satisfaction are important priorities in this frame. Collaboration such as the parent-school relationship is imperative. Examples could be how staff and parents communicate and collaborate regarding the student. Additionally, looking at how the relationships are built, maintained, broken, and repaired is an important feature of this frame.

Political frame. The political frame deals with power differentials by looking at formal and informal power. Formal power is that which is given to an individual within an organization or group because of their rank (title). Formal power contrasts with a person of informal power, such as a popular worker or team member with no legitimate authority but has the following of the group. A power struggle can ensue between these two individuals. The balance and shifting of power can be seen via bargaining and leverage. Sources of conflict can also arise when resources are scarce, or there is a mismatch in values or beliefs (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Power differences in the IEP meeting can be due to formal and informal power. To be more specific the formal power of the school district vs. the informal power of the parent. There can also be a power imbalance viewed as *us against them*, power differential. Parents leverage power for services, schools leverage for authority to limit services or for specific placement

(Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The political frame is about negotiation and bargaining for resources. Scarce resources require bargaining on both sides. Types of services including frequency and duration are often negotiated as well as program placement. Conflict can also arise when there are differences in the values and beliefs of individual team members. Examples of value or belief differences can be seen when the vision or goal a parent has for their child is different from the vision or goal of the teacher/school/district for the student. When the bargaining turns to conflict and cannot be resolved, we see litigation.

Symbolic frame. Symbolism is a core function of any organization or group as it can bring people together. For example, office parties or a school site's sunshine committee brings about positive interactions for the benefit of the group, thus building culture. The culture of the group or organization is essential as it sets the tone and can have a significant bearing on the individual experiences as well as group outcomes (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Bolman & Deal, 2013).

The IEP is a ritual in and of itself with its highly-scripted flow and content. The culture (or tone) of the IEP meeting is set with the physical environment and then is built upon with the spoken and unspoken language of the members. This frame takes into account the theatre-like nature of the IEP meeting with the set, props (IEP and assessments), and the actors playing the part of the team members. Questions related to the culture of the IEP meeting could include: How are parents and team members greeted upon arrival or are they only acknowledged when the meeting starts? In what ways do members talk to each other (over one another)? How do parents and service providers perceive the time they are given to respond or comment (equal opportunity, fair)? What do the interactions look like between parents and the school,

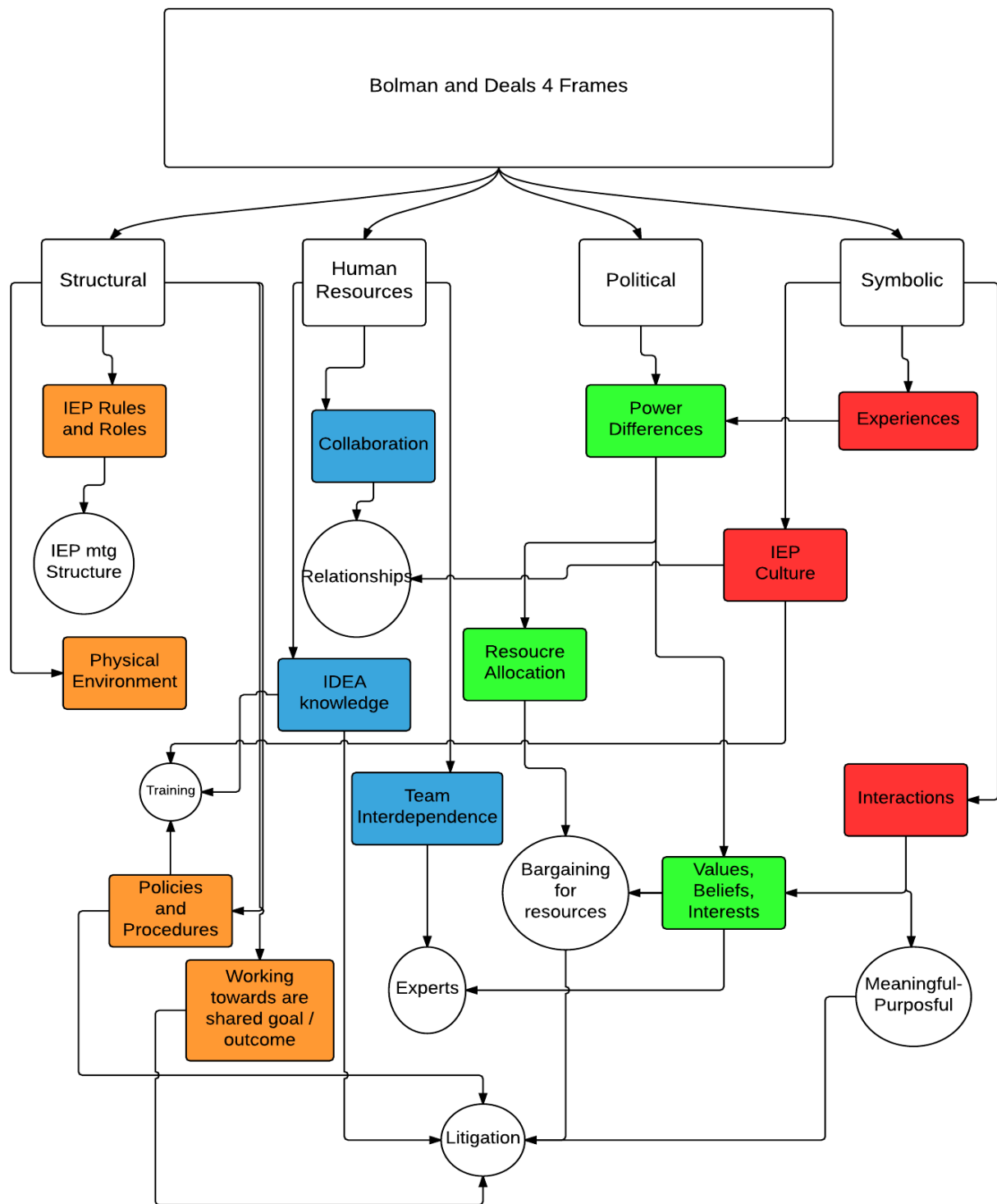


Figure 3: IEP Process through Bolman and Deal's 4-Frames

principal and teacher? In what ways do parents feel that they have had positive or purposeful interactions? In what ways do the faculty and team members feel that they had meaningful and purposeful interactions?

Theoretical Framework Limitations

One of the limitations of the 4-frames is that of perspective taking. Each person/ group have their frames that they are naturally comfortable operating within. If the chosen frame does not correspond to the anticipated or desired outcome, the individual/ group could suffer from a disappointing result. The frames require reflection on one's practices to create change. An additional limitation is that multiple realities exist through multiple frames.

Methodology

Narrative Inquiry is a method of collaboratively collecting data surrounding the experiences of others to understand the experience from their perspective (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Data is often collected during in-depth interviews, a written journal, artifacts, and even video. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explained narrative inquiry as follows:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

Re-storying participants narrative accounts into a chronological timeline is an important element of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and was employed in this study to aid in the understanding of the parental experience of parents new to special education. The conceptual framework from Connelly and Clandinin (2006) on narrative inquiry guided this study. Temporality, sociality, and place are three common dimensions of narrative inquiry that comprise the conceptual framework. Temporality, the derived meaning of experiences of a person or event can change based on experiences from the past, present, and future. Sociality, accounting for the social conditions that the participant experience was situated within. Additionally, accounting for the emotions, hopes, dreams, morals, and experiences of the participants. Lastly, experiences are linked to the physical location in which they occurred. Participant experiences regarding the specific location of their IEP meeting experiences were ascertained through the interview process.

The interview questions and activities developed for this study and explained in greater detail in the data collection section address the sociality of the parental experience by provoking responses which detail the social conditions including feelings and emotions of their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006.) Temporality or the derived meaning of an experience over time was built into the structure of the interview questions as well as the timeline activity. Lastly, the physical location element of the narrative inquires framework was addressed in the interview questions and activities aimed at eliciting a rich, full description and drawing of the IEP meeting location including members present and feeling attached to the experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Participant Selection

Narrative research can occur with one participant. This study focused on a total of five participants to gain a rich understanding of their experience. The focus of this particular study was limited to the experiences and perceptions of parents new to special education across the last three years. Representation of parents with longer involvement in special education, special education staff, district, or site administration perceptions and experiences were not represented in this body of research. The variation of parent participant across multiple school districts was sought to gain a richer understanding of the perceptions and experiences of new parents to special education. A parent participant is defined as one parent (singular) who has educational rights for the corresponding student with an IEP. Additionally, said parent must have been the participating parent in the IEP process and meetings under study. Participants for this study were recruited using a two-tiered sampling approach. This consisted of snowball sampling followed by purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants were recruited from the geographic region of Northern California. Recruiting of participants started by employing snowball sampling by disseminating a brief description of the study to multiple Special Education Local Plan Area's within the geographic region under study. Additionally, recruitment occurred with local family resource centers, Community Advisory Committees, and the Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities to elicit potential participants. Snowball sampling is a method of relying on participants or others to aid in recruiting other potential participants to the study. Respondents were screened to ensure that they meet the inclusion criteria. The screening process took place via a telephone intake interview utilizing the criteria depicted in *Figure 4*.

Educational rights holder (as defined in IDEA) of a child on a current IEP within region under study in Northern California

Must have been the parent who engaged in the IEP processes from initial assessment to current annual.

Initial IEP must be within three school years from a school district within the region under study in Northern California

Student must have an eligibility for special education services while in grades K-6

Parent must be new to the IEP process, meaning only one child in the household who has ever gone through the assessment process to determine special education eligibility.

Triennial review including assessment process has not occurred at the time of interviews

Agree to participate in two audio-recorded interviews of 90 minutes and 60 minutes

Figure 4: Inclusionary Criteria

Participants were selected to maximize the variation within counties and school districts represented to not skew the potential data collection with a specific school districts practices or policies. Five participants (see *Figure 5. Demographics*) were interviewed for this research study. Four were mothers and one was a father of a child newly qualified for special education. One of the five participants was an adoptive parent. Four of the five students new to special education were male and one was female.

Adam is a married father of two children in his forties. His third grader has an IEP and is the eldest of his two children. Grette is a wife and working mother of three children. Her eldest is in fourth grade and has an IEP. Grette is in her thirties. Camila is a single mother of three

children. Her middle child is in Kindergarten and has an IEP. Jill is a working mother and wife in her forties. She has one child who is in fourth grade and has an IEP. Debbie is a married mother of three also in her forties. Her first born is in first grade and currently has an IEP. The education level as well as field of study for each participant was not collected as part of the demographic intake form. However, during the screening process any participant working in the field of special education specifically was not included in the study.

School District	4	Income Level	
County	3	0-20,000	1
Gender of Participant		20,001-30,000	1
Female	4	Above 105, 001	3
Male	1	Initial Eligibility	
Gender of Student		Speech and Language	
Female	1	Impairment	3
Male	4	Other Health Impairment	3
Ethnicity of Participant		Grade	
White	3	Kinder	1
Asian Indian	1	2nd	1
Hispanic	1	3rd	1
Dual Parent Household	4	4th	2
Single Parent Household	1		

Figure 5: Demographics

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was created for in-person interviews. An interview guide is a tool utilized by researchers to outline and guide the topics of interest that will be covered during the interview (Patton, 1987). Interview guides allow for flexibility in the wording and question sequencing. Interview guides allow for a conversational style interview.

Another benefit of an interview guide is comprehensive data due to interviewees answering the same topics (Patton, 1987).

Interviews for this study explored the understanding and experiences of parents during their first years of the IEP process. The semi-structured interview protocol was tested with a parent for understanding and clarity and modified per feedback. The final protocol of open-ended questions was designed to provoke a full description of the parental experience, feelings, and perceptions of the IEP process. The questions were derived from the purpose of the study and the guiding research questions. Following are a few examples of questions within the interview guide: How did you feel during the meeting?; What was the atmosphere like during the meeting?; What was your perception of the members of the IEP team?; How did the meeting end?; How did you feel?; In the months after the IEP meeting how did you feel?; What questions did you have?; Who did you ask?; What was that interaction like?

The protocol served as a guide to assist with the facilitation of the in-person interviews. The interviews were conducted at mutually agreeable locations that afforded the privacy and confidentiality of the interview due to the personal nature of the research topic. Interviews were conducted in a two-interview format with an open-ended semi-structured interview and a follow-up activity-based interview. The initial interview was scheduled for no more than 90 minutes in duration. With the secondary interview scheduled for no more than 60 minutes in duration. Both interviews were audio recorded using a Sony digital recorder. All data obtained in the course of this research was maintained in a locked, secured safe and will be destroyed after a period of three years from the completion of this study.

The initial interview was structured by the semi-structured interview guide. Before the start of the interview the participant completed the Demographic Intake Form (Appendix B).

During the interview, the participant completed a drawing activity in which they were asked to draw the physical layout of the initial IEP meeting. After the participant completed the sketch, they were asked questions about their initial IEP experience using the sketch to elicit memories and stories of what had occurred. Types of questions that were asked consisted of: Discuss where the meeting was held, the room layout, who was in attendance, where did they sit?; How did you feel walking into the room?; Were you greeted?; What did you know to expect at the annual IEP meeting?; How?; Who explained it to you? As mentioned, audio-recording occurred across all interviews for two reasons. The first being that recording the interview frees the researcher from scrupulous note taking so they may fully engage and immerse themselves in the conversation. The second reason is so that verbatim transcription of the interview can occur for the purpose of coding the data collected.

The activity-based second interview had two purposes. The main purpose of the second interview was to elicit participant experiences and perceptions through an interactive interview process that was guided by the purpose, framework, and research questions for the study. The secondary reason for the follow-up interview was to allow the participant an opportunity to revisit any topics or questions covered in the first interview given any potential reflections or new information that they would like to share.

Three forms structured the second activity-based interview. The forms were presented one at a time and in the same order for all interviews. The participants were given the instructions for completing each form. After each form was completed follow-up questions were asked about each entry. Descriptions of experiences linked to each entry was elicited. The interview progressed through the same steps until all three activities were completed at which

time any additional information that the participant wanted to share was recorded, and the interview concluded.

The first form asked participants to identify their support system, more specifically those who assisted with the participants understanding of the IEP process. The form was a graphic that represented a web with the participant in the middle. The second activity was formatted into two lists side-by-side. On the left side was barriers and challenges faced during the IEP process and the right side was potential solutions that they can identify for those specific barriers they listed. The third activity was a reflective activity. The participant was asked to use a timeline to identify what information they felt they needed and at what point during the timeline did they need it. The data gathered was analyzed and coded utilizing the processes laid out in the following section.

Data Analysis

Data collection from five participants across two interviews including the four total activities was coded. Interview transcripts were created by transcribing verbatim every audio-recorded interview. After a period of becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts a process of inductive coding was deployed. Inductive coding is coding that begins with smaller pieces of data moving towards coding that produces a big picture idea or theme (Merriam Tisdell, 2016). This process began with one transcript and continued with each subsequent piece of data.

Each piece of data, starting with the first transcript went through an open-coding process in which sentences, phrases, and sections of the data was identified and coded. Creswell (2007) states that codes can be applied to text segments that address such things as setting or context, perspectives, emotions or feelings, barriers and strategies, participant beliefs and values,

processes and timelines. Upon completion of the initial coding stage, the codes assigned to the transcript data were collected, reduced (grouped) for redundancy, and defined, thus creating a coding scheme. The coding scheme was piloted on the same transcript as a stage two coding process. This step was completed for two reasons. The first reason was to pilot the codes generated in the first round with the entire transcript. The second was to identify any additional codes that may emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A master coding scheme was generated by comparing and merging the coding scheme from the first and second rounds of coding. Quotes were identified through the coding process that supported codes generated. The master coding scheme was then utilized across the remaining data to be coded.

Theme development occurred after all data was coded. Similar codes across all data sources were sought and categorized. Recurring patterns within the data were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Codes and categories were prioritized, reduced, and aggregated based on the purpose of the study and guiding questions into emerging themes. According to Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2012), themes can be described as a major or significant idea. The spectrum of themes that can emerge from the data as described by Creswell (2012) are hard-to-classify, those that shock or are unexpected, of course, those that are expected or reaffirming, and lastly those themes that represent minor or major ideas from the study. The themes that emerged from the data collected are discussed in the findings section of this article.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was obtained through multiple procedures that increased the credibility of a qualitative study such as the use of a researcher audit trail, the use of thick, rich descriptions, member checking, and researcher reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher audit trail consisted of a detailed running account of the decision-making process

during the data collection and analysis stage. Decisions made during the coding and thematic creation processes were also captured in the researcher journal (Carcary, 2009). Other activities that were documented in the researcher journal were research reflections, questions, and impressions during the data collection and analysis stages which include post interview impressions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, after each interview impressions of the interview, participant's tone and affect, interview observations, and anything not picked up by the digital recorder (before or after recording started/stopped) was documented.

Next, thick, rich descriptions of the findings were employed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participant quotes coupled with detailed narrative accounts that give way to a vivid description for the reader to be able to conceptualize the findings were used. Member checks in the form of sending full interview transcriptions to each participant to account for accuracy thus lending credibility to the study occurred prior to coding (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Research reflexivity or the role of the researcher is another procedure for trustworthiness and credibility of a study.

Role of the researcher. Trustworthiness can also be obtained in studies when researchers state their positionality, philosophical assumptions, and biases that could affect the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Philosophical assumptions are the way in which a researcher views the world, the research, and their role within each (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From an ontological stance, I view reality as having multiple versions. Meaning that any given experience can be viewed from each individual's experience given their perspective, understanding of, and meaning created by that experience. My research interests were in the understanding of the individual experience. More appropriately stated, my interests were with the perception, understanding, and meaning created by the individual of the said experience. My belief is that every experience can have multiple outcomes (positive or negative)

depending on the individual realities of those involved. Factors such as time, setting, context, positionality, power, coercion, symbolism, process, routine, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and more can be part of an individual's experience which shapes their reality (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As a researcher, I am interested in the perspective of individuals and their experiences.

Current interests and past experiences drive research interests. It is important to explicitly state my interest as a researcher (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I am a current Board Vice President of a family resource center. Our mission is to train, support, and empower families of differently abled children to advocate for and raise successful, productive members of our community. I am also a parent of a differently-abled child whose child currently has an IEP. I have attended many IEP meetings for my child and have participated in the IEP process for several years as a parent team member. Professionally, I oversee a special education department at the district level. I also hold a position within a statewide multidisciplinary training and support initiative for the use of autism evidence-based practices. I have held past positions in school districts of special education teacher and teacher on special assignment tasked with coaching other special education teachers on instructional practices. I am also part of a multidisciplinary educational leadership program for neurodevelopmental disabilities.

From my multiple experiences, I have experienced the IEP process and IEP meeting from multiple perspectives. My bias and assumption from these multiple perspectives were that the IEP process and IEP meeting can be organized and executed in such a way that parents feel included and valued as a team member. It is important to note that it is also an assumption and bias that this does not occur on a consistent basis. The open-ended semi-structured interview guide coupled with the interview activities were created to elicit the participant's perceptions

including barriers and future suggestions for the IEP process and IEP meeting. These will be used to influence future practice.

Ethical Considerations of the Study

Narrative inquiry evokes the recalling of emotion, feeling, understanding and perspective of past experiences of participants through the use of in-depth data collection techniques (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study drew upon the in-depth open interview and activity approach to gathering data to understand the experiences of the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Because personal information including thoughts and feelings were shared by the participant, all participants received an informed consent form detailing the nature of the research, potentially harmful effects of participation, and information regarding the right to not participate or stop participating at any point in the study. Confidentiality risks were minimized with the use of pseudonyms for all participants as well as locations shared, and individuals disclosed in interviews. An assumed potential psychological risk was from sharing experiences that may be emotional and are related to the participant's child is disclosed on the informed consent. The research was of a voluntary nature and participants were free to stop participating at any point within the study including the interview process.

Findings

The findings are organized into three sections structured by each research question. Within each section, themes are presented that emerged from the data.

Question 1. *What challenges or barriers do parents of students receiving special education services experience with the IEP process?*

When asked about the challenges or barriers faced as a new parent to special education four common themes emerged: timelines, ignoring parent concerns, 504's as a consolation prize, and lack of information and understanding.

Timelines. A common barrier expressed by interviewed participants was with the explanation or lack thereof, and adherence to the timelines set out in IDEA. IDEA allows school districts 15 days to respond in writing to a parent's written request for special education assessment. Secondly, a school district has 60 days from the receipt of a signed (consented to) assessment plan to complete the assessment and hold an IEP to review the findings and determine eligibility for special education services. For school breaks over five days school districts are allowed to pause the clock, so to speak, for the duration of the break. The clock resumes with the first school day back from the break. Debbie shared, "When you're a parent just learning of these processes and timelines, that sounds great. It's like, sixty days my child may have an IEP, but ultimately that's not the case."

Debbie: You know, law and everything is great, but it doesn't prepare you. There's the law timeline, but then there's the true timeline and the true timeline you don't even hear about until you're in it. And at the end of it, like the true timeline is almost a full school year if you're lucky.

Frustration mounted for four of five participants whom it took several months up to two years before the school district agreed to assess their child. For three of five parent's multiple written requests for assessment were made prior to the assessment being granted. The fourth parent made verbal requests and one written. Overall, all of the parent participants described their dissatisfaction with the length of time it took to get their child the help they needed.

Two participants shared their long experience which spanned two years in duration. Their journey was marked by multiple parent requests for special education assessment. They were met with multiple denials of their requests and even had their requests ignored. Adam explains, “We had gone through two years of trying to get them assessed for the IEP.” After multiple attempts with hand-delivered letters, mailed letters, and emailed requests, one of these parents had a letter drafted from an attorney which they attached to another request for assessment letter and sent this through registered mail. This request was honored. The student was granted the assessment and qualified. The other parent recounted a year-long journey that included multiple written requests that were not answered. This student also qualified for special education once they were assessed.

Debbie: It took me several requests for an IEP... I never heard responses... I pick up the phone; I got tired of not hearing anything back...and I left a voicemail message for the school psychologist...She said by my doing that... I forced them to jump-start the IEP process. That made absolutely no sense to me whatsoever. But I was so desperate by then that I took it. I'm like; I don't care what got me here, I'm just finally here.

As reported four of five participants submitted parent requests for assessment. One parent participant did not. This particular student had gone through the response to intervention (RTI) process. This student did not make the gains that the school site and parent planned for given the interventions. This parent expressed her disappointment with the length of time the school site took to move from RTI intervention to special education assessment once the student showed they were not responding to the interventions. The perception was the school district waited for students to fail. This waiting to fail perception was pointed out by all of the study participants.

Grette: I think once they determined that the RTI was a failure, getting the actual IEP process started was super slow... They started RTI in second grade, it didn't work, and so he wasn't tested until third grade, that's a huge gap.

Ignoring parent concerns. The perception of having their concerns as parents ignored by the school site and even school district went hand-in-hand with the issue's parents experienced with the lag in assessment after a parent request. One comment made by Camila in reference to the school district was, "pretend that you care even if you don't care." Camila conveyed her experience on the first day of Kindergarten with her child's school and her and the Doctor's concern for potential autism. Within months the student was put on modified day prior to addressing the parent request for assessment. "I didn't feel like it was an option. I felt like they were telling me...are they going to kick him out? So, they shortened his day."

504's as a consolation prize. The experience of trying to get their children help through a special education assessment was marked by roadblocks in the form of ignored written requests, student study team meetings held in lieu of a written denial for assessment, as well as the school/district telling the parents that the school would need more time to monitor the student before they would consider moving forward with an assessment.

Debbie: They don't tell you about the struggle of even getting to that [special education] request, it's extremely, extremely long. And in the meantime, your kid is sitting there melting away in school and not learning the way they should.

Three of the five parent participants shared being offered a 504 when requesting special education assessment and/or being told that a 504 was a necessary first step in order to get to the special education assessment that determines eligibility for an IEP. Multiple parents shared their experience of being told by the school district that that they "needed to do a 504 first." The

feelings of one participant who was told they had to have a 504 and was not allowed the special education assessment for two years shares:

Adam: That's just ridiculous. I think he/she should've had the services they needed. I realize they don't know the first week of school, but as soon as they knew there was an issue, that he/she needed help, they should've had that help. I mean, isn't that what the whole FAPE, the whole accommodation thing is about, is making sure you have those services when you need them. I think it's ridiculous that it took so long. I shouldn't have to fight the school district for this stuff.

In another story of a parent being forced into a 504 despite requesting an assessment for special education, the parent enrolled their child into their local public school after the child was expelled from a private school due to behavior. The private school lacked the ability to support students that may need special education services. Upon enrollment, a request for special education assessment was made by the parent. The parent shared the history of school discipline and behaviors.

Jill: I got declined by the county to have him evaluated [for special education] because he'd never been in the public school system before, which I don't know what difference that makes. To me, it shouldn't matter...that kind of made me annoyed. But they wanted to jump through some hoops. So, I'm like, all right, fine, I will do what you're telling me. They said we needed to do a 504 first.

Additionally, parents complained about the confusion and lack of information regarding the similarities and differences between the 504 and the IEP. "I didn't even know what the difference between a 504 and an IEP [was]. I had no idea what my rights were, I had no idea what I could even ask for, and who would I ask?" Adam explained as he referenced his lack of

understanding of his legal rights. This was echoed by the other participants who were pushed into 504s instead of the school districts assessing their children to determine if they qualified for special education services.

Adam: I mean, I really just didn't even know. I had never even heard of a 504, and I didn't know why it would be suggested in place of an IEP. I had no idea that they wouldn't be able to get the services they needed under the 504 that we have to change to the IEP later...at the beginning I was just lost.

Lack of information and understanding. Lack of information was noted by four of the five participants as a major hurdle. The fifth participant shared that being an educator (not in the field of special education) themselves gave them the foundational understanding of what an IEP was. Therefore, they felt they knew what to expect in terms of the process. The perception and experiences of the other four participants were quite the opposite of that.

Camila: It's the lack of information because it just seems like they know what they have to do, but the least they tell me the, I feel like the better off they are. Instead of giving me all my options. I feel like they try to guide me to one option.

Participants elaborated on the types of information that they felt they did not have, was not given or did not understand. A lack of understanding of the law IDEA. This was also noted as a lack of information as it relates to school districts carrying out the assessment process, timelines, eligibility, and offer of services. It was also shared that a lack of information surrounding the entire assessment process. Parents noted that they were unsure what type of assessments were going to be used when their child would be assessed, who was performing the assessments, which assessments would be used and why they were chosen. The experience level of the person assessing was called into question by three of five participants.

When asked if parents were prepped by the school what to expect at the initial IEP meeting, the majority said “no,” or only “broad strokes” of information was given. At the initial IEP meeting, there was some confusion over the roles of the people in attendance and the necessity of those people at that meeting. A few parents elaborated that during introductions the members stated their names and titles but not what their function, role, or purpose was for being there. This led to confusion as these members were typically people the parent had not encountered previously or met prior to the meeting. Paperwork was also another area that participants felt they had a lack of knowledge and support regarding how to read understand and find the information within the documents. Adam shared his frustration with the complexity of the process by stating, “everything is so incredibly complicated. There's so much freaking paperwork, and so much of it repeats itself so many times. I realize there is a lack of funding, but the district needs to be able to distill this process down and explain it much better than they do right now.”

Question 2. *In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services describe their emotions and feelings regarding their experiences with the IEP process?*

Three themes emerged from the data. The first theme was a feeling of not being part of the team. Debbie explained, “I went into all of it with kind of blinders on, you know, in every meeting, in every interaction, I went into it as we were equals, but they don't see it that way.” The second theme was of being taken advantage of. And lastly, participants reported feeling worried about being perceived as a problem parent because they were advocating for their child to receive help.

All five parent participants described feeling nervous throughout the process. A lack of understanding and information on IDEA and how law translates into practice at a school site lead

to feelings of anxiety, frustration, anger, and even self-deprecation. Debbie elaborated on this when she shared, “everything that I learned, even though now I know it's correct and everything, but everything I'd learned I doubted myself on. I was made to really doubt myself a lot.”

The lack of information caused some parents to question the level of support and advocacy for their child that they were able to give. Camila conveyed her doubts by saying, “I'm a little confused on whether or not; I'm doing all I could do for him/her just because I don't know what I should and shouldn't be doing.” The majority of the parent participants conveyed the feelings of their experience with the IEP process as being, “so stressful and so overwhelming that I don't think anything you can do really prepares you for the actual process of it” as was conveyed by Debbie.

Descriptive words such as nervous, anxious, shaking hands, forgetful, scared, apprehensive, and defensive were used to describe the way parents felt walking into the threshold of the room for their first IEP meeting. Four of five parents shared that they had prepped themselves to expect the worst while hoping for the best. As the meeting went on the majority of parent felt their nerves lessen, but their confusion over paperwork and assessment findings increase. By the end of the meeting when all five students met eligibility for special education, the majority of parents felt that they were listened to, at least in part. The atmosphere according to four of five parents was positive by the end of the meeting. Follow-up meetings were needed for most of the parents.

Power imbalance. Parents also shared feeling a power imbalance due to the significant difference in special education knowledge between the school district and themselves.

Debbie: They say knowledge is power and in these cases it absolutely a hundred and ten percent is. I wish that the team would have maybe used their knowledge. They are

educators...When it was clear I didn't understand something, it would have been nice to have them ensure that I did or at least make an effort toward my knowing these things rather than just using that as a way to prolonged testing. I feel like what I didn't know was very much used against us.

This power imbalance was seen in multiple settings from the ignored or denied request for assessments, to the offer of a 504 in lieu of assessing for special education. The initial IEP meeting was marked by a lack of understanding about who would be there, their role, as well as what to expect in the meeting. Confusion and anxiety were noted regarding the actual IEP paperwork and eligibility. The power imbalance showed itself when parents describe not understanding why their child did not qualify under certain eligibility areas but did qualify in another.

When asked how they felt walking into the initial IEP meeting, Camila stated, “oh wow, I felt like I was back in school, like I was in trouble. Nervous, excited. I was hoping this is the beginning of getting him some help.” The feeling of confusion and stress followed parents throughout the entire process from assessment to initial IEP. Parents shared the feeling of being talked at and not talked to. Information and reports were presented rote and not broken down into understandable terms. During the review of the psycho-educational report at the initial IEP, Debbie described feeling, “confused and I kind of just blank out because it's just so overwhelming.” Adam explained his perceptions of how the mismatch in the level of understanding and the exorbitant amount of detail made the information confusing and hard to understand.

Debbie: [I was] extremely confused and like desperately trying to keep up with what was going on and what was being read and said. It's like it was created to be me versus these

people. And I felt like they were very above me and that they felt they were very above me. And so, I was just trying to; at this point, I'm trying to pretend I'm keeping up because I want them to see me as equal even though they don't. I'm just like getting through.

Being taken advantage of. This power imbalance of information leads to the feeling of being taken advantage of. Parents described situations when they felt they were taken advantage of because they didn't know any better such as with the forcing of a 504 when requesting special education assessment. "Because I don't know what the process is, what my options are. I felt like I get...you get pushed into something," Camila explained. Additionally, parents described feeling an imbalance of information regarding eligibility. They described not understanding the reasons why their child did not meet eligibility in one area but did in another. Another parent shared a disconnect between the law and current practice on school sites and the power imbalance they felt when the district did not follow the law. Debbie shared, "it seems like there's a lot of miscommunication between law and what the actual school site process is...there's just no oversight to ensure that these processes are being followed." Stories of feeling forced into a decision or given no other options were shared. This was a strong feeling for the majority of the participants during points of their initial IEP journey.

Camila: When they reduced his day, they made me feel like that's what you should do... I was literally told he legally doesn't have to be in school until after he's six. So, I felt like, if we don't reduce his day, they were going to take him out. So, lack of information. I feel like because we don't know, we get taken advantage of.

Not part of the team. The majority of the participants described experiences that made them feel as if they were not a part of the IEP team. Comments such as Debbie's, "I'm part of

the team but not to them,” and Camila’s comment of “I don’t feel like they’re on my team and my sons, team [student name]” were made. Parents referenced that they felt they were there to agree to what was presented. Or that their input was not taken into consideration and therefore, they felt devalued. “There was always push-back, I never felt like there was ever a mutual agreement,” as shared by Debbie. The following two accounts are three different parent experiences as shared by Camila, Adam, and Debbie.

Camila: I felt like I was there to listen. Like they were going to tell me basically how it was going to be...I just feel like, regardless of what I say, they’re probably going to do what they do anyway.

Adam: I mean you have to understand, I had been very apprehensive and defensive for two years at this point, you know, going in and there was nothing to make me feel less apprehensive. I felt like I was going to, I was under the impression that they were going to continue to try to deny her any services that would be helpful and that maybe we wouldn’t even be able to keep the OT that she was currently getting and maybe she was even going to lose her 504. Maybe they were going to say she doesn’t qualify for any IEP services at all. I didn’t know.

Debbie: I was really belittled like I had no reasoning for even requesting it. I was shunned, and honestly, I spent a long time crying, a lot of time crying. Why would all these people do this? It was, it was really, really, really emotional and hard. I felt like it was a fight, almost like, do I call a lawyer? I don’t know; I felt very ill-educated. I felt belittled and just really on a personal basis, hurt. These are people I’m supposed to have a relationship with and you know, these are his early years in education. What he does now is going to totally set the stage for the rest of his life

Every parent felt that they were supposed to be part of the team. Each shared their desire and attempts at advocating for his or her child's needs. One of the parents who had a very long struggle with getting their child assessed for special education shared the following regarding the importance of valuing the expertise of parents at the IEP table.

Debbie: I think that IEP teams on the school and district end need to realize that the parent is a vital part of the team because when you form a team, no matter what it is, you form a team because you need different insight to a situation or to something. And you know a Vice Principal brings insight, a school psychologist brings insight, a nurse, whatever it may be, an attendance person, but a parent brings in insight that none of those people could possibly bring to the table. And so, because of that, they really need to be sought as a true member of that IEP team. Not somebody who's in the way or somebody who's trying to be difficult.

It is important to note that feelings did change for the majority of the participants after the assessments showed the student's qualified for special education. The perception by the parent participants was that their input was more readily sought out.

Concern over perception. The concern over how the school perceived the parent and how they could impact or influence the outcome for their child's eligibility for special education was described by several participants. Camila discussed the feeling that themselves and their child were being labeled due to the behaviors that were occurring at school. "I felt frustrated that they weren't helping us, as they were labeling us."

Jill: I know that there's a timeline that they're supposed to follow [it] and that I wasn't as pushy as I could've been about making sure that they stuck to that timeline. And some of

that again was because I didn't want to be seen as a difficult, obstructive, pushy parent.

You know, because I don't want that to reflect on what happens for him/her.

Debbie shared her perception of the treatment she experienced by the school site for advocating for his/her child, "I was met with a lot of unforeseen kind of, for lack of better terms, retaliation for fighting so hard I think and ensuring that law was followed."

Staff training. The perception of a lack of training in special education at the school site and district level was mentioned by four of five participants. Specifically, as it relates to IDEA, the IEP process, running an IEP meeting, and the differences between a 504 and an IEP. School site administration, school psychologists, teachers, and district administrators were described in multiple accounts of not knowing the law, sharing incorrect information, and even denying requests verbally without prior written notice. Debbie shared, "The vice principal, he seems to not be knowledgeable in any of the IEP process." Camila described the lack of experience or training she felt the school psychologist had, "it just felt like they didn't really know kind of what they were doing...I had to go in a couple times during the weekend because, [school psychologist said] oh, I forgot to do this test." Adam expressed his concern over the lack of experience with assessing and providing services for disabilities that are specifically listed within the law.

Adam: It turns out that the district didn't have anybody to assess who could...evaluate for dysgraphia or dyscalculia. They didn't have anybody to do that. Well, that seems like a pretty big deal because those are issues that a lot of kids have, and they require really specific types of help. So why doesn't the district have those people?

Question 3. *In what ways do parents of students receiving special education services describe the needs of new parents to special education?*

The last question that this study sought to answer was regarding the needs specific to parents new to special education. Participants were very clear and focused in their responses to this question. They linked their needs to that of their hurdles. The themes, similar to that of the issues and barriers that parents faced were an extreme need for information in multiple areas, a desire to have timelines explained and upheld, and a huge need to be supported and welcomed by the school district to make the process easier by sharing information.

Debbie: I just feel a lot of tensions between the members of the team, including the parent, could be relieved if it's just explained better on more of a layman's terms or something. Just, hey, I know you don't get this, but let me explain it to you or let me do this... It would remove a lot of animosities and let a lot of guards down to where they could really function as a team.

A resounding need was reported for the very basic of information such as, “how do you ask for an IEP and then what happens after you asked,” as shared by Jill. Jill went on to describe that not all parents know that they have the right to ask for a special education assessment for their child. Other areas concerning a lack of information stemmed from understanding the entirety initial IEP process from requesting the assessment, to who will assess my child, when will assessment occur, what does that look like, how long does each of these steps take, all the way through to who will be at the IEP. Participants shared wanting to know more than just the titles of those attending the IEP meeting. They wanted their function and purpose for being there.

Participants were able to illustrate ways in which school districts could support parents new to special education thus eliminating the barriers that they felt they encountered (see *Figure*

6, Parent Suggestions). Adam shared a suggestion regarding the way school districts share information including assessment reports:

Adam: I just think the district needs to explain every step in much more, not necessarily more detail, but they need to convey more information. Sometimes that's done with less detail. In my experience, they overload you with detail to the point where you don't even know exactly what's happening.

Humanizing the journey and personalizing the experience is also needed. When explaining this need, Adam shared wanting someone to sit down with them without the “bureaucracy” and say “I totally get what you're going through. I understand how hard this is for your kid and hard it is for you to watch this happen to your kid. These are things that would be helpful for your kid and for you.”

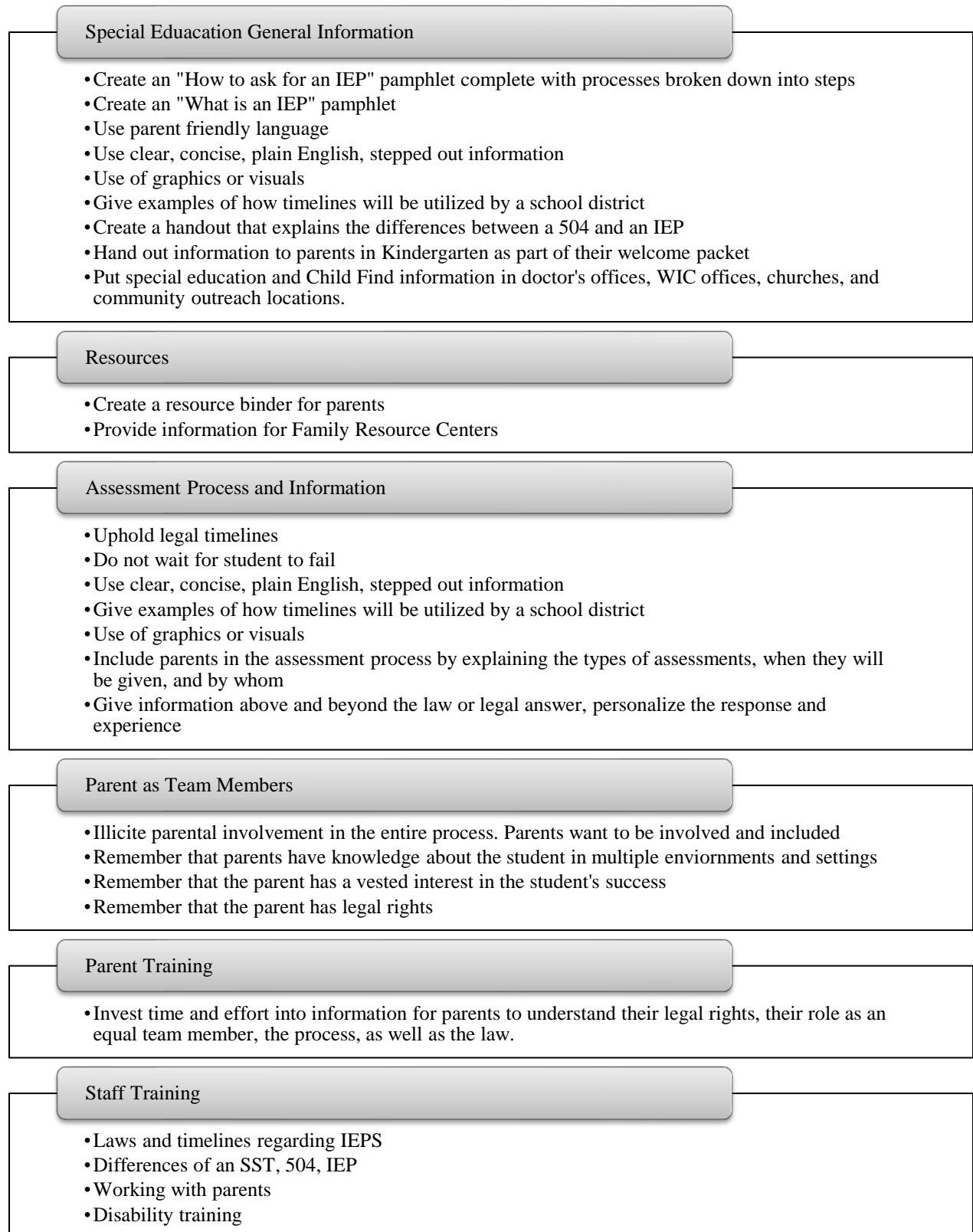


Figure 6: Parent Suggestions

Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study indicate that parents new to special education felt a rift between themselves and the school district when they attempted to get their child the help, they felt was essential to their child's educational, behavioral, medical, and mental wellbeing. Participants described long stressful processes of contacting their school district with multiple requests for assessment. Their requests were met with silence, a lack of support or understanding for the family perspective was described. The feeling of having to "fight" for a special education assessment for their child was a prevalent feeling shared by four of the five participants. The lack of adherence to the legal timeline and process for dealing with a written request for assessment is of concern given the findings of this study.

A commonality in all three research questions was the need for information and support. School districts should include parents in the IEP process as an equal team member by explaining the assessment process, who will be performing the assessments, the types of assessments, and what they may look like in terms of the student's school day.

Participants wanted a better line of communication between themselves and the staff assessing their child so that they may ask questions. They also wanted more information as to the logistics of the assessments so that they could prep their child for a change such as being pulled out of their classroom to complete assessments for a few hours over multiple days. Participants communicated that school districts should explain who will be attending the IEP, the staff member's role at the meeting as well as their role within the school district. The lack of understanding of each staff members purpose and role led to confusion as to why they were present at the IEP meetings.

The members of the IEP team need to be inclusive of the parent and respect the role and position of the parent as an equal IEP team member. Additionally, school districts need to function as a resource hub of information for struggling students and their parents. Family resource centers and Regional Center information should be readily available and shared with parents. Broken parent relationships lead to increased due process filings and department of education complaints. Parent and community partnerships need to be a top priority for school districts.

The ability to take the perspective of the parent, to understand the difficulty they face, the family dynamic, the student's needs past the typical school day and how these factors affect the family unit outside of school needs to be a high priority for school districts. Parents want to feel that they matter and that their child's needs matter. This is a very emotional experience for them. They do not go through the initial IEP process multiple times a school year like the staff at a school site do. They have one initial IEP experience. School districts should make it a priority to make sure parents understand the process and are informed of their rights. Being supportive and caring on the front end will build strong parent-school relationships in the long run, thus strengthening the support system for the student.

Teacher education programs should focus curriculum on parent perspective, parents as team members, the role of a parent within the IEP process, and the effects of disabilities on the family system. In addition, teacher prep programs need to emphasize the legal ramifications of not following the law. Lastly, both school districts and teacher preparation programs should ensure that it is understood that under IDEA a written request for special education assessment is not to be hindered by the interventions given through processes of SST or RTI. It is also important that a 504 plan is not used as a prerequisite for an IEP or in lieu of. The finding

regarding three of five participants sharing that they were told they “had” to have a 504 before they would be considered for a special education assessment may signal that there may need to be legal training at the district and school site level across multiple counties and school districts.

Special education is guided by the IDEA and is prescriptive in how to handle parental requests for assessments, the inclusion of parents as team members, and even educating parents on their procedural safeguards. Working collaboratively as a team to educate students is in the best interest of the school district, parent, and ultimately the student. By supporting parents understanding and including them in the process, we can strengthen the IEP team thus creating a supportive unit for the student.

Recommendations for Further Studies

This study focused on the in-depth experiences of five participants in Northern California. Because of the low number of participants and the focused geographical region the findings of this study should not be generalized to all parents who are new to special education. Given the number of occurrences that a 504 plan was used as a response to a parent request for special education assessment, a future study should be conducted on the prevalence of this practice. Additionally, a future study should be conducted with school site administrators and service providers regarding their understanding of the 504 plan and an IEP. I recommend a study focusing on the experience of parents who request special education assessment. This study should focus on the experience of the request and the process that followed due to the large number of written requests for assessment that went unanswered or answered inappropriately in this study. The last recommendation is to replicate this study on a larger scale, across multiple regions to determine if the findings in this study are systemic or isolated.

References

- Applequist, K. L. (2009). Parent perspectives of special education: Framing of experiences for prospective special educators. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 3-16.
- Bailey, T. R., & Zirkel, P. A. (2015). Frequency trends of court decisions under the individuals with disabilities education act. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 28(1), 3-13.
- Bolman, L.G., & Deal, T.E. (2003). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and Leadership* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bolman, L.G., & Deal, T.E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and Leadership* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bolman, L.G., & Deal, T.E. (2013). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (5th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookshire, R., Klotz, J., & University of, C. A. (2002). *Selected teachers' perceptions of special education laws*.
- Carcary, M. (2009). The research audit trial - Enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 7(1), 11-23.
- Cherian, F., Daniel, Y. (2008). Principal leadership in new teacher induction: Becoming agents of change. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership*, 3(2).
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Rosiek, J. (2007). Mapping a landscape of narrative inquiry:

- Borderland spaces and tensions. In D. J. Clandinin, & D. J. Clandinin (Ed) (Eds.), (pp. 35-75). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, P. B. Elmore, J. L. Green (Ed), G. Camilli (Ed) & P. B. Elmore (Ed) (Eds.), (pp. 477-487). Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Fish, W. W. (2006). Perceptions of parents of students with autism towards the iep meeting: A case study of one family support group chapter. *Education*, 127(1), 56-68.
- Fish, W. W. (2008). The IEP meeting: Perceptions of parents of students who receive special education services. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 53(1), 8-14.
- Fish, W. W. (2009). Educator perceptions toward the IEP meeting. *Academic Leadership*, 7(4), 10.
- Karanxha, Z., & Zirkel, P. A. (2014). Trends in special education case law: Frequency and outcomes of published court decisions 1998-2012. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 27(2), 55-65.
- Lake, J. F., & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(4), 240-251.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage Publications.

- Losinski, M., Katsiyannis, A., Balluch, F., & White, S. (2015). Litigation and students with disabilities: An overview of cases from 2013. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 28(1), 25-37.
- Lyon, L., Nadershahi, N., Nattestad, A., Kachalia, P., & Hammer, D. (2014). A curricular reform viewed through Bolman and Deal's organizational frames. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 14(3), 16-33.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, Michael Quinn (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tucker, V., & Schwartz, I. (2013b). Parents' perspectives of collaboration with school professionals: Barriers and facilitators to successful partnerships in planning for students with ASD. *School Mental Health*, 5(1), 3-14.
- Yell, M. L., & Gatti, S. L. N. (2012). Legal issues and teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders: Identification, Assessment, and Instruction of Students with EBD*, 22, 1-29.
- Zirkel, P. A. (2013). Is it time for elevating the standard for FAPE under IDEA? *Exceptional Children*, 79(4), 497-508.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter I review the purpose for this dissertation. Next, a summary of the major findings from both articles, Chapters 3 and 4 respectively are discussed. The interconnectedness and linkage of the two articles are highlighted. Then, a summary of how the findings from this research link to the larger body of current research are given. Lastly, implications for practice and recommendations for further research are discussed.

Dissertation Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the experiences of parents whose child recently received an eligibility (within three years) for special education. This information was sought to identify ways to increase partnerships and understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). I employed narrative inquiry to explore how parents of students in special education learn about understand IDEA. Additionally, I sought an understanding of the parental experience as it relates to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. Data was collected regarding specific points throughout the initial IEP process such as the request for assessment, assessment period, initial IEP, and subsequent IEP meetings. Experiences and perceptions regarding support and knowledge level of IDEA and procedural safeguards were of importance to this dissertation. Success stories, barriers to inclusion or partnership within the IEP team, as well as suggestions to improve the IEP partnership were sought.

Major Findings Grounded in Current Research

The previous two chapters (articles) have shown how the connectedness of information or lack thereof can impact the perception and experiences of parents new to the world of special

education. In article one (Chapter 3) I explored how parents learned about the law that governs special education as well as how they learned about and could explain their procedural safeguards. I also looked at how parents perceived their role in the IEP process. In article two (Chapter 4) I was interested in learning about challenges, barriers, and needs of parents new to special education. Additionally, I wanted to understand their feelings and emotions regarding their experiences. The first article's focus was on the support systems and knowledge base of parents new to special education while the second article's focus was more on the parent participants' perceptions, feelings, experiences, as well as barriers and suggestions. Separately each article gives pieces of information or glimpses of the parent experience, together they provide a full picture.

The collective findings from the overall body of research conducted for this study can be grouped into the following seven themes:

Parent inclusion. As described in studies conducted by Fish (2006). Lake and Billingsley (2000) as well as Applequist (2009) the legal mandate of parental participation in IEPs does not lend to practice as reported by all three research studies. Like the participants in both studies, the participants in this study described feeling a rift between themselves and the school district when they attempted to get their child help. Much like Fish's (2006) study, the participants shared that when they brought an advocate to their IEP meeting, it made for a more positive meeting as the staff were more willing to elicit parent input and involvement as well as adhere to IEP procedures. In the current study, the parent-school relationship was reported to improve once the student qualified for special education. Parent participants also reported being included more at subsequent meetings.

Jill: To me, at the end of the day I need to be an advocate for my child and that's basically what this whole process has been, is trying to advocate for my child. I get to make sure that he gets what he needs, that we can't do it on our own...every single step of the way, everything has all been about advocating for him.

Legal timelines. Of major concern was the lack of adherence to the legal timeline and process for dealing with a written request for special education assessment. This perception was exacerbated by the reality the two-year-long process of submitting multiple written requests for assessment with the number of the requests being denied or not acknowledged by multiple participants. The findings revealed that despite parents putting their request for special education assessment in writing and submitting it to school staff, administration, and even the school district directly their requests were ignored, refused, and 504 plans were put in place without determining if each of these students met eligibility for special education. This went on for two year and across multiple written requests. This signals an issue between legal mandate and current practice. This led to a perception of districts waiting for students to fail.

Consolation prize 504. A surprising finding shared by three of five participants was that of being forced into a 504 plan as a “first step” to an IEP. These three parent participants requested special education assessment for their child and were told “no” that they must first place their child on a 504 plan. It is notable that this practice was not isolated to one school district or county. This happened across three different school districts in three different counties. Perry Zirkel in his article on the Top Five Section 504 Errors Redux (2013) noted that the number one error is to give a 504 plan to a student as the consolation prize for an IEP.

Need for information and support. Participants of this research study conveyed the need for school districts to be supportive of their lack of understanding and knowledge about

special education law and the IEP process including their role in the process. The majority of participants conveyed a need for school districts to educate parents on the law pertaining to special education. This theme of parents sharing the desire to be fully informed of the special education process, service options, and procedures to make the best decisions for their child was noted in Applequist (2009) and Rodriguez, Blatz, and Elbaum (2014) studies.

Nutting, Porfeli, Queen, and Algozzine (2006) collected survey data across nine different IDEA focus areas. The study revealed, that approximately a third of special education parents did not know that they had the right to due process. An overwhelming majority (99%) of special education parents responded that they should be involved in their child's education. However, one-third did not know that they were legally entitled to the right of parent involvement. These findings align with the results from this research study. Three of five participants divulged that they did not know any of their rights or felt they were unimportant at the time. The participants who could verbally recount at least one parental right stated that they learned of their rights from their family resource center.

Power imbalance. The lack of information and support from the school districts created what participants described as a power imbalance. The overwhelming feeling of a power imbalance that lead to perceptions of not being part of the team, taken advantage of, and being viewed negatively were shared. This power imbalance was also described in a study conducted by Lake and Billingsley (2000) in which they analyzed the perspectives of parents, administrators, and mediators after due process or mediation sessions regarding the parent-school conflict. Parents reported feeling an imbalance of knowledge regarding the "rules and regulations" guiding special education. This imbalance of knowledge and understanding of the law led to feels of inadequacy to properly advocate for their child thereby creating conflict.

Debbie: I just feel a lot of tensions between the members of the team, including the parent, could be relieved if it's just explained better on more of a layman's terms, or something. Just, hey, I know you don't get this, but let me explain it to you or let me do this... It would remove a lot of animosities and let a lot of guards down to where they could really function as a team. And you know, the end goal is that child and when that team is not functioning that's in place for that child, that child is ultimately the one that's going to feel that. If their true intent is to educate that child and gain that child access to education than everybody has to be sought as a member of that team. I don't think a lot of times that the parent is.

Part of the team. In alignment with several parent perspective studies which revealed parents felt isolated, outnumbered, manipulated, and judged (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013), the participants in this study felt that they were not part of the “team” and the presence of a power imbalance. Parents indicated the desire to be viewed as an active team member. The critical need for more information, open communication, and support are essential to building an understanding of the IEP process thus lessening the participant’s anxiety and making them feel like part of the team. Participants also shared the need for school districts to understand the holistic view of living with and caring for a child with special needs as well as the family dynamic.

Adam: I think that a lot of the people who work in the district are very emotionally distant. I think that they are very clinical. I think they don't sympathize. I don't care about me, but I don't think they sympathize with how hard it is for [student name]. They talk a lot about the parents, and sure that's great, we do need support too, but I don't think they

realize he/she is this little person who's going through a lot and they're aware of what they're going through. They're not ignorant

Advocacy. With regard to the need for information, Applequist (2009) wrote that parents reported needing unbiased information in order to no longer feel isolated and incompetent during IEP meetings. The majority of participants, four of five, from this study credit the assistance of a family resource center for educating them on special education law and their parental rights. Furthermore, family resource centers also supported by explaining the IEP process and attending IEP meetings. Family resource centers provided resources such as emotional support, advocacy, trainings, and support groups to the majority of parents.

Much like the results from Fish's (2006) study, the participants in this study also reported that the presence of an advocate made staff more willing to include the parent in the IEP meeting. The overall meeting experience was described as positive when an advocate attended vs when held with only the parent. Additionally, staff elicited parental input and made a better effort of adhering to procedures.

Discussion

Study after study is revealing that parents perceive a lack of information and support from school districts regarding special education law and their parental rights. This study focused on the specific area of parents new to special education. This particular area was not a specific focus in previous research. The gap in the literature was important to study as parents new to special education could give feedback to the potential support and information that they perceive is needed in order to eliminate the barriers they encountered. The results are sobering and yet familiar as they align with past research studies. If the parents were supported and given

adequate training and information about IDEA, they would feel more informed and could be ready participants in IEP meetings.

Furthermore, school districts have overwhelmingly, in this study as well as past studies, neglected to follow legal timelines. The haphazard implementation of IDEA at the district and school site level is creating parent-school conflict. The sheer lack of implementation of the law can be seen in the two years wait some of these participants endured. The lack of response to their parent requested special education assessment as well as the 504 consolation prizes are also evidence of this.

Years of research coupled with litigation and due process complaints support the need for an over haul of the way in which IDEA is implemented at the local level. These findings could have implications for the way in which higher education and credentialing programs are educating our next generation of educators and administrators. Emphasis needs to be given to the highly legal driven processes of special education (IDEA) as well as section 504.

Implications for Practice

The significance of this research is three-fold. The first is that understanding how parents gain their training and understanding of the law, as well as their perception of their role in the IEP process, is vital for policy creation and implementation at the local, state, and national level. Parents cannot function as equal team members if they lack the understanding of their rights and their role in the process. Developing their understanding and supporting their role is a key function of school districts. If the current processes and policies are not leading to the desired outcome as we can see is the case in multiple studies, then a change may be necessary. Secondly, this research has implications for teacher training within higher education and the credentialing pathway systems. And lastly, this study can influence the programs, practices, and support given

to families by family resource and empowerment centers. All three of these possible implications have the potential to dramatically increase the likelihood of creating a more collaborative and inclusive special education process for parents.

Future Research Recommendations

Recommendations for future research are numerous as a result of the breadth of findings from the entirety of the research study, article one and article two. The recommendations are grouped into two areas: special education and section 504.

Special education. Given the lack of understanding and perception of importance of procedural safeguards (parents' rights) by my participants, I would recommend investigating the extent of parental understanding regarding procedural safeguards on a large scale including the school districts role in that understanding. Recall the exclusionary criteria for this study was that none of the participants could have special education experience. The experience levels of the participants specifically were not collected within this study, however there was diversity within the educational level of the participants in this study and this might be a factor to look into as well. The next recommendation would be an exploration into the relationship between the initial parent concern which resulted in special education assessment and the actual areas of suspected disability for which a school district assessed. This is important as participants shared that their initial concern for their child was not the area that was initially assessed by the school district. This is a direct violation of IDEA which stipulates that "the child is assessed in all areas of suspected disability" (20 U.S.C. § 1414(b)(3)(B)). I would also recommend a study focused on the similarities and differences between the perception's schools have vs those of parents regarding the parent role in the IEP process due to the findings of perception differences shared by parents in this study. In addition to the previous recommendation, I suggest a study to explore

how credential programs are instructing their credential candidates on parent involvement both in the teacher credential program as well as the administrative credential program. Lastly, I recommend a future study on the outcome of parent requested assessments for special education assessment due to the large number of written requests for assessment in this study that were ignored or responded to inappropriately.

The following questions should be considered for future special education research:

1. How do school districts support parents in their understanding of procedural safeguards?
2. What is the relationship between the area of concern on an initial parent request for special education assessment and the areas of suspected disability assessed by a school district?
3. How do schools district and parent perceptions of the parent role in the IEP process differ?
4. In what ways do special education credentialing programs curriculum support the partnerships with parents in the IEP process?
5. In what ways does the administrative credentialing program prepare new administrators for leading special education on their school site?
6. What are the outcomes of parent requested assessments for special education?

Section 504. Given the number of occurrences that a 504 plan was used as a response to a parent request for special education assessment a future study should be conducted on the prevalence of this practice and the school districts justification and or district policy governing the practice. I would also suggest studying the understanding of the school site administrator and/or 504 coordinators regarding 504 and IEP eligibility. In addition to this study I would recommend studying how credentialing programs are teaching credential candidates about 504

and IEP eligibility. The last recommendation is for a replication of this study to occur within multiple regions to determine if the findings regarding the denial of special education assessment coupled with the offer of a 504 plan as found in this study are systemic or isolated to the region in this study.

The following questions should be considered for future section 504 research:

1. What is prevalence rate of a 504 being offered in lieu of an IEP assessment?
2. In what ways do principals/504 coordinators understand the eligibility similarities and differences of a 504 and an IEP?
3. In what ways are credentialing programs addressing the topics of 504 and IEP plans?

Chapter Summary

The number of students eligible for special education is increasing yearly at a steady rate. Research and litigation trends are showing that the current way of supporting parents as equal team members is not working. This is a call to action for all education practitioners including our higher education system, and the credentialing pathways to rally together to create a new way of teaching and supporting our next generation of teachers and administrators to understand how to implement IDEA that is legally compliant as well as inclusive of parents as equal team members.

References

- Applequist, K. L. (2009). Parent perspectives of special education: Framing of experiences for prospective special educators. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 28(2), 3-16.
- Fish, W. W. (2006). Perceptions of parents of students with autism towards the iep meeting: A case study of one family support group chapter. *Education*, 127(1), 56-68.
- Individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. (2004).
- Lake, J. F., & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(4), 240-251.
- Nutting, B., Porfeli, E., Queen, J. A., & Algozzine, B. (2006). Parent beliefs and knowledge about special education and the individuals with disabilities education act. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 19(2), 48-61.
- Rodriguez, R. J., Blatz, E. T., & Elbaum, B. (2014). Parents' views of schools' involvement efforts. *Exceptional Children*, 81(1), 79-95.
- Tucker, V., & Schwartz, I. (2013b). Parents' perspectives of collaboration with school professionals: Barriers and facilitators to successful partnerships in planning for students with ASD. *School Mental Health*, 5(1), 3-14.
- Zirkel, P. (2013). Top five Section 504 errors redux. *ELA Notes*, 48(2), 14-15.

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Research Title: Issues With Equity Among Team Members In Special Education: Voices of Parents New To Special Education

Lead Researcher: Amanda Johnson

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Thomas Nelson

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION: Your consent is being requested to voluntarily participate in an interview-based research study on the perceptions of parents who are new to special education and the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the parent experience, perception, and understanding of special education through the lens of the IEP process including the IEP meeting. You will be asked to engage in two, in-person, one-to-one interviews with the researcher. Both interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. The data obtained will be maintained in a locked, secured safe and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is complete.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 90 minutes for the initial interview and 60 minutes for the secondary interview.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks associated with this study are possible loss of confidentiality. To mitigate the risk, pseudonyms will be used for all research papers and conference materials. There is an assumed potential psychological risk from sharing stories regarding a potential emotional experience. Every effort will be made to be respectful of each participant's experience. The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study is having a platform to share your experience, perception, and stories so that others may learn from them.

COMPENSATION: You will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card as payment for your participation in each interview at the end of each session.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this research project, you understand that your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at educational/academic or professional meetings or published in educational or academic journals. It is possible that we may decide that your participation in this research is not appropriate. If that happens, you will be dismissed from the study. In any event, we appreciate your willingness to participate in this research.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Pseudonyms will be used instead of real names, school names, and school district names. The data obtained will be maintained in a locked, secured safe and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is complete. After a period of three years from the date of dissertation completion the electronic data will be erased and hard copies shredded

COLLECTION OF INFORMATION: Any information obtained in connection with this study that has identifiers will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission.

NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS: Research results will be shared with all willing participants.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks, and benefits, contact the Lead Researcher, Amanda Johnson at [209-269-0320/a_johnson38@u.pacific.edu] or the Faculty Research Advisor, Thomas Nelson 209-946-3253.

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the IRB Administrator to speak to someone independent of the research team at 209-946-7716 or IRB@pacific.edu.

I hereby consent: (Indicate *Yes* or *No*)

- To be audio recorded during this study.
___Yes ___No
- For such audio records resulting from this study to be used for transcription purposes.
___Yes ___No

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been afforded the opportunity to ask, and have answered, any questions that you may have, that you willingly agree to participate in the research study, that you understand that you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE** _____

Research Study Participant (Print Name): _____

Researcher Who Obtained Consent (Print Name): _____

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INTAKE FORM

Name (and preferred name): _____

Age: _____ Gender: _____ Race/Ethnicity: _____

Contact Information:

Number of Children: _____ Birth Order of Child with IEP: _____

Number of children with an IEP: _____

Did you or your spouse have an IEP in school? Y /N

Have you had experience with IEPs other than with your child? Y / N

Current grade of child with an IEP: _____ Month/Year of first IEP: _____

Eligibility (circle all that apply):

Autism	Blindness	Deafness	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Intellectual Disability	Multiple Disabilities
Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impaired	Specific Learning Disability	Speech or Language Impairment	Traumatic Brain Injury	Visual Impairment	

Classroom Placement: _____

County: _____ School District: _____

Annual Income: (Circle one) _____ Number of persons in household: _____

0-20,000	20,001-30,000	30,001-45,000	45,001-60,000
60,001-75,000	75,001-90,000	90,001-105,000	above 105,001

APPENDIX C: PRIMARY INTERVIEW GUIDE

DAY IN THE LIFE

- Walk me through your day yesterday from the time you woke up until the time you went to bed. Is this a typical day for you?

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

- Take me through the assessment process that led up to the IEP meeting?
 - How did you feel during this process?
 - How did you perceive your role during this process?
 - How was this process explained to you? By who?

INITIAL IEP MEETING

- Please draw the physical layout of your first IEP meeting.
 - Discuss where the meeting was held, the room layout, who was in attendance, where did they sit?
 - How did you feel walking into the room? How were you greeted?
 - Tell me what you expected at the initial IEP meeting? Who explained it to you?
- How did the meeting start?
 - Tell me about your Parent's Rights (procedural safeguards). What was your understanding? How were they explained to you?
 - Describe what Parent's Rights mean to you.
- How was the IEP information presented to you?
 - Tell me your understanding of the information that was presented.
 - What questions did you have? How were they answered?
 - How did you perceive your role during this meeting?
- How did you feel during the meeting?
- What was the atmosphere like during the meeting? What was your perception of the members of the IEP team?
- How did the meeting end? How did you feel?
- In the months after the IEP meeting how did you feel?
 - What questions did you have? Who did you ask? What was that interaction like?

ANNUAL IEP MEETING

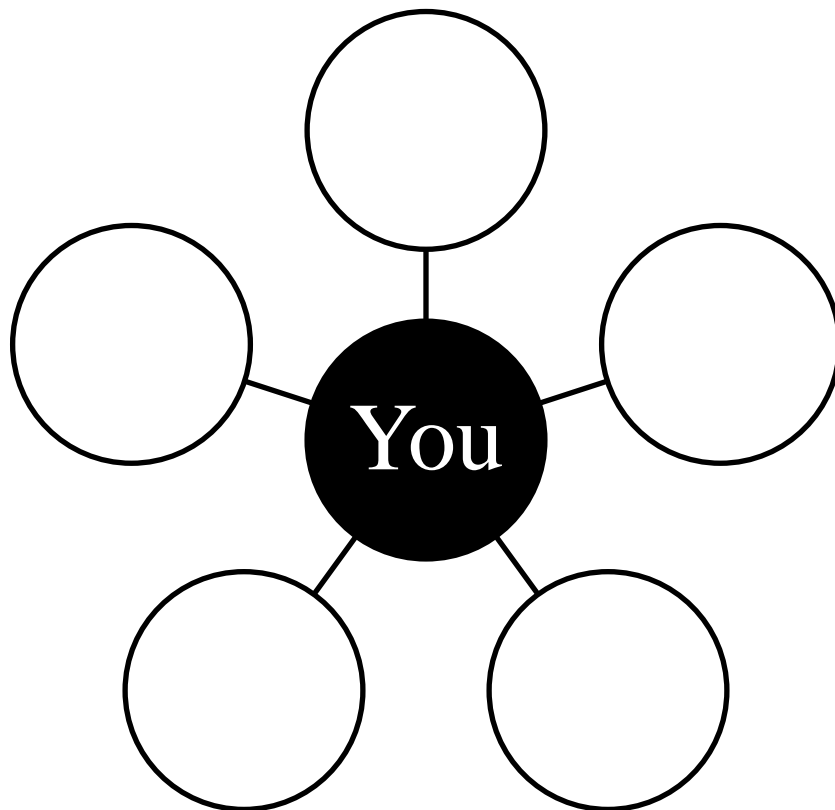
- Walk me through your annual IEP meeting.
 - Where was the meeting held, who attended, where did you sit?
 - Tell me about what you expected at the annual IEP meeting? Who explained it to you?
- How did you feel walking into the room? How were you greeted?
- How was the information presented to you? What was your understanding?
 - What questions did you have? How were they answered?
- How did you perceive your role during this meeting?
- How did you feel during the meeting? At the conclusion of the meeting?

WRAP-UP

- What is something that I should know that would help me understand your experience as a new parent to the world of special education?

APPENDIX D: SECONDARY INTERVIEW ACTIVITIES

Who has supported your understanding of the IEP process such as before or during the assessment process, IEP meeting, or IEP implementation?



Please list challenges and barriers you encountered during the IEP process as well as your suggestions for potential solutions.

Challenges & Barriers	Suggestions
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Looking back on your experience what information would you have liked to have had and at what point would you have wanted or needed it?

